

# DONNA JO NAPOLI

*WRITING WITH PASSION*



HILARY S. CREW

## SCARECROW STUDIES IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

### Series Editor: Patty Campbell

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*Writing with Passion*

Hilary S. Crew

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## Preface

THERE ARE THREE LIONS—a large one in the front yard and two smaller lions flanking the front door—outside the home of Donna Jo Napoli, which is a stone's throw from Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, where she teaches linguistics. She thinks of them ambivalently as her “Persian beasts” but also as her “Venetian beasts.”<sup>1</sup> A prolific author of books for young people, her novels for teens include *Beast*, featuring a Muslim Persian prince, and two historical novels set in Venice. She is an artist, she draws, and she makes ceramics. She is a nature enthusiast and brings art and nature together in her books. She dances, she travels, but above all, she finds joy in her writing. She received me warmly and graciously into her large kitchen where she, her husband Barry Furrow, and I sat down to homemade pea soup and home-baked bread, and where she talked candidly about her writing for young people.

### NOTE

1. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, November 7, 2009.



## *Acknowledgments*

SOME OF THE CONTENT OF THIS BOOK is based on my article "Spinning New Tales from Traditional Texts: Donna Jo Napoli and the Rewriting of Fairy Tale," *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 2002).

I thank Patty Campbell for always being available and for her guidance through the process of writing. I thank all my family for their support. I especially thank Donna Jo Napoli for her graciousness and time in granting me an interview, for her hospitality, and for continuing to answer lots of questions via e-mail.



# Introduction: A Linguist and a Writer

DONNA JO NAPOLI IS A LINGUIST, a mathematician, a creative writer, the mother of five grown children, and a grandmother. She is passionate about language, art, and the rights of young people, especially the civil rights of deaf children. She also likes to travel and has conducted much of the research for her young adult books in other countries. In *Alligator Bayou*, her most recently published novel for young adults, there are themes that are found in her other books for teens: an unmasking of bigotry and hypocrisy; a belief in family and friendships; and the conviction that whatever terrible things happen in one's life, there is a place from which to begin again.

The youngest of four children, Napoli was born February 28, 1948, into an Italian American family in Miami, Florida. In a postscript to her award-winning novel *The King of Mulberry Street*, she tells about her grandfathers, both of whom came from Italy. Her maternal grandfather, Rosario Grandinetti, was from Calabria and came to the United States from Napoli on the *Bolivia*. Known as Francesco, or Frank in the States, he was a house painter. Her paternal grandfather, Domenico Napolillo, known as Dan J. Napoli, was also born in Italy, probably in Positano, on December 24, 1888. The story told to Donna Jo Napoli and a cousin was that Domenico came to the United States when he was only five years old as a stowaway. Although this cannot be verified, it seems that Domenico was “an illegitimate child” and “penniless” but became successful by starting a sandwich business in Five Points, New York (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 245).<sup>1</sup> Napoli incorporates the stories about Domenico into this novel, in which nine-year-old Beniamino, later known as Dom, is put on a

cargo boat as a stowaway to New York by his mother. He learns to survive on the streets of New York and, like Napoli's grandfather, starts a business buying and reselling sandwiches. She wishes, she writes in her postscript, that she had sat down with her grandfather when he was alive and listened to her family history.

Napoli's mother's family was also from Calabria, Sicily, which is the setting for her children's novel *Three Days*. Napoli, thus, has strong family ties to Italy and subsequently has spent summers with her husband, law professor Barry Furrow, and their family in Florence, the setting for *The Smile*, and in Venice, the setting for her novels *the Daughter of Venice* and *For the Love of Venice*. The stories and descriptions in these novels reflect her detailed knowledge about Italy: its history, art, architecture, food, and, of course, language.

Raised as a Catholic, Napoli was, she says, "a very devout little girl."<sup>2</sup> She is now a secular humanist—an "atheist"—who believes, however, "in the spirit."<sup>3</sup> But in talking about her novel *The Song of the Magdalene*, she says that the religious stories of her Catholic upbringing were part of her childhood and "influenced how she saw the world." She quotes a woman rabbi who told her, after reading this novel, that "you can take the girl out of the Church but you can't take the Church out of the girl" (Napoli, author interview).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BOOKS AND EDUCATION

Although her childhood was often happy, her family was not without problems. Her father, a contractor, was a speculator and built and sold homes, so they moved homes frequently. He was "a poor business man and generous to a fault," but he also had a gambling problem.<sup>4</sup> "One day in third grade," she writes in an essay in *Horn Book Magazine*, she "arrived home to find everything [she] owned out on the sidewalk" because they had been evicted.<sup>5</sup> They were poor, and although there was a lack of books and magazines in their home, her family valued education. "Libraries," Napoli writes, were her "favorite places"—as were "empty lots" where, after reading a book about "surviving in the wild," she would "fashion bows and arrows out of palm fronds" and pretend she was "living alone in the wilderness." Books allowed her, she writes, "to be someplace else—to live in a different world." They were her "best friends" and supplied her with

the details used to “create the adventures in [her] head as [she] played alone.”<sup>6</sup> From the time when she and her husband began reading and telling stories with Elena, their first child, reading and telling stories became an important part of family life.

Napoli writes that she was slow learning to read, but once she was given eyeglasses and then contact lenses to alleviate her myopia, her life changed. She blossomed at school. When she graduated ninth grade, she “won the award for best student in home economics, in Latin, and in mathematics” (Napoli, SAAS, 164). Education was important in helping her find a way forward, and she reinforces its value for girls in her novel *Daughter of Venice*. At Coral Gables High School, Florida, Miss Reynolds, her Latin teacher and “a wonderful classicist and human being,” introduced her to Latin and the *Aeneid*.<sup>7</sup> Napoli’s love of classical literature is especially integrated into her young adult novels *The Great God Pan* and *Sirena*, which are based on Greek myths. She was offered a full scholarship to Radcliffe, and this, she writes, was “another turning point” in her life. The “world of ideas” that she had “yearned for in the books” she read and which she had “gotten a hint of” in her high school honor classes now “opened up” for her (Napoli, SAAS, 166). She earned degrees in mathematics, Italian, and linguistics from Harvard University: a BA in mathematics, 1970; an MA in Italian literature, 1971; and her PhD in general and romance linguistics, 1973. She married Barry Furrow during her junior year at Radcliffe. Their first daughter, Elena, was born when she was teaching part time at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She also taught linguistics at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., before being appointed at the University of Michigan, where she was promoted to Professor of Linguistics in 1984. In 1987, she was appointed Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. Her areas of specialization in linguistics include “syntax (mostly of Italian) and the structure of sign language.”<sup>8</sup> She is the recipient of fellowships and grants, including National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships; the author of a formidable list of articles and books in the field of linguistics; and also a successful creative writer.

## A WRITER

Napoli did not set out to be a writer even though a college instructor had suggested that she write. Growing up in a poor family, she “absolutely

wanted a secure career,” and “writing wasn’t it” (Napoli, *Eighth*, 392). She vowed she was not going to be “lured into a profession that was so financially unstable” (Napoli, “What’s Math,” 61). But after her first daughter was born, she suffered a miscarriage. This was the beginning of her writing career. In her grief, she wrote daily letters to a friend who saved them and told her that she had “written a novel.” It was not a novel, but she did know that she “loved to write.” It “transported her and absorbed her” (Napoli, *SAAS*, 170). Encouraged by friends, she began submitting stories to publishing houses. In “On Writing as an Art and a Need,” Napoli writes about how, when she first began, she kept writing every day despite the letters of rejection. She asked friends to read her stories and “grew big ears and thick skin” so that she “could hear criticism without being hurt.”<sup>9</sup>

Napoli has proved to be a versatile writer who crafts poetry, fiction, and short stories. In an interview with writer and editor Patty Campbell, Napoli tells the story of her experience with a literary agent when she wrote her second book, *Soccer Shock*, a story about a fifth-grade boy who, despite his lack of athletic prowess, hopes to make the soccer team with the aid of his magic freckles. She was advised to get “rid of the freckles.” Her son Nick, in fourth grade, who had been on a school trip to visit children’s author Lloyd Alexander, suggested she should call his “good friend” who “knows everything about what children like.” So she did, and he asked her to send him the story. He phoned her back, telling her, “Don’t dump the freckles, dump your agent.”<sup>10</sup> It was Lloyd Alexander who introduced her to Dutton Publishers.

Napoli has since published picture books and books for elementary and middle school, including the series *Sly the Sleuth*, co-authored with her son Robert Furrow. A short story for teens, “So Many First Kisses,” was recently published in Cylin Busby’s collection *First Kiss (Then Tell)*. On her website, Napoli lists nineteen young adult novels, all of them discussed in this book. In her first children’s book, *The Hero of Barletta*, and in her third, *The Prince of the Pond: Otherwise Known as De Fawg Pin*, Napoli presents old stories from very different perspectives, a strategy she later employs in retelling fairy tales for teens. Her first book published for teens was *The Magic Circle*, a retelling of “Hansel and Gretel” written from the perspective of the witch, which was critically acclaimed as original and “ground-breaking.” It was performed as a musical at Media Theater, Media, Pennsylvania, in 2001. *The Magic Circle* was followed by *Zel*, a retelling of “Rapunzel,” in which Napoli uses a plural narrative to tell

the story from three different perspectives. With the publication of *Crazy Jack, Beast, Spinners* (with Richard Tchen), and *Bound*, Napoli cemented her reputation for creating appealing novels for teens that honor the power of the traditional tales. Napoli draws from the New Testament for *Song of the Magdalene* and from the legend of the piper and the rats of Hameln for her novel *Breath*. She writes that she has chosen “fairy tales, myths, and religious stories” as “foundations” for her novels because, she believes, they “deal with the very heart and soul of humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

The basis for the story of Melkorka in *Hush: An Irish Princess' Tale* comes from an Icelandic saga and is set in Ireland and northern Europe in the early 900s. Except for *Alligator Bayou* and *The King of Mulberry Street*, novels discussed in this book are set in countries other than the United States. Even in *North*, a contemporary realistic novel, in which a boy leaves his home in Washington, D.C., to follow in the steps of his hero, Mathew Henson, the main story mostly takes place north of the Canadian border. She explains that she has an “irrepressible urge to create worlds. I want my books to be the best friends of children and to help them step into different worlds from the ones they live in, because we all need that” (Napoli, *Eighth*, 393). Many of the nineteen novels discussed in this book are historical novels, including *Stones in Water* and its sequel, *Fire in the Hills*, set in Europe and Italy during the Second World War.

Napoli has received awards for her writing for both children and young adults. Notable awards for her young adult novels include the Sidney Taylor Book Award and a Golden Kite Award for *Stones in Water*, a Sydney Taylor Honor Book Award for *The King of Mulberry Street*, and a Golden Kite Honor Book Award for *Breath*. Her novels have received Parents' Choice Awards, including a Parents' Choice Gold Medal Award for historical fiction for *Alligator Bayou* and Carolyn W. Field Honor Book Awards from the Pennsylvania Library Association for *Stones in Water*, *Beast, Spinners*, and *Fire in the Hills*. *Stones in Water* and *The King of Mulberry Street* are also National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books. Novels that have been selected as ALA Best Books for Young Adults are noted in relevant chapters. Her books have been translated into many languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Italian, German, Dutch, and Portuguese. Napoli was awarded a grant for individual women artists from the Leeway Foundation in 1995 for excellence in fiction. Her contribution to children's literature is recognized by the Literary Lights for Children Award, Boston Public Library, 2007.

## WRITING AS AN OUTSIDER

Napoli writes and speaks about herself as an “outsider.” There was a time in her childhood when she was “into the role of outsider,” and this experience has never really left her. She believes this is a “huge part” of why she writes. It gives her a perspective that allows her to write her young adult novels. Young adults, she observes, “see and define themselves as outsiders” (Napoli, author interview). In “Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories,” Napoli notes that “one of the defining characteristics of adolescence is that . . . between the ages of twelve and eighteen most of us feel like outsiders.” Then, as we begin to accept ourselves and others and make “friends and find our niche,” we give up our “identities as outsiders.” But “for some of us,” Napoli continues, “being an outsider is not just a certain perspective on life,” it is a “lifelong characteristic. We are simply different” (Napoli, “Fairy Tales,” 1). In referring to how writers and artists often define themselves as “outsiders,” Napoli argues that this gives them another perspective. They can “offer something” in the way that “someone on the inside” cannot (Napoli, author interview).

## WRITING HONESTLY ABOUT TOUGH SUBJECTS

As “a child of the sixties,” Napoli states, she hates all “bigotry” (Napoli, author interview). Napoli does not shirk from writing about difficult subjects. She writes young adult novels in which protagonists confront hypocritical attitudes and cruelty. She writes stories that deal with slavery, rape, aggressive acts perpetrated against innocent citizens in war, and the lynching of immigrants in Louisiana. From fairy tales to historical novels, Napoli exhibits an honesty and toughness that perhaps has not always been recognized.

In a review of her novel *Breath*, Michael Cart writes that the novel is not “for the faint of heart.”<sup>12</sup> A group of Utah librarians asked her, “Why do you put us through this?” referring to books that include tough subjects such as rape. She explains that “bad things happen to children, and they happen behind closed doors.” They happen, she continues, “in all kinds of families.” She feels strongly that children “need to read that somebody has gone through hell and come out the other side.” She also realizes that there is another side to her writing about these topics. She is not only

writing for the “unprotected child,” she is also writing for the “protected child.” “Where on earth are they going to learn empathy?” she asks if they do not read about unprotected children. “It is only through empathizing, through experiencing vicariously the horrible things that can happen,” that they can “begin to understand how lucky [they] are to be protected.” She states passionately that children need to understand that “it is not their fault” when “bad things happen to others who are in the wrong place at the wrong time and were born into this situation” while they “were born into that situation.” Until children understand this, Napoli emphasizes, how, she asks, “are we going to have a decent society?”

She doesn’t want people to “close their eyes” when they read her books. She says, with a laugh, that she wants people “to faint” at her novels because she wants them to “feel.” But she also writes funny books because children need “a varied diet.” She says that she is not against “chocolate cake” but “we need to eat other things, too.” She now realizes that what she wants people to take from her books is for the lucky to know they are lucky and the unlucky to “feel that they have a chance at living a decent life if they can figure out how to live”—if they can “find a decent place to be” (Napoli, author interview). Elsewhere, Napoli has written that when she writes for children, she does not

hesitate to present them with the sadness of mortality and the horrors of wickedness—but I always try to leave them with a sense that whether or not they can change the problems in life, they can find a way to live decently and joyfully. Hope is an internal matter. I strive to cultivate it in my readers. (Napoli, *Something About the Author*, 159)

In those young adult novels in which Napoli’s protagonists go “through hell” and “come out the other side,” Napoli leaves them in places from which they have a chance of making better lives for themselves, while still leaving open the question of how they will fare. The honesty and openness with which she treats difficult subjects is also seen in her books for children. In the picture book *Flamingo Dream*, for example, which is about the death of a young boy’s father from cancer, Napoli writes on the flap of the book that she wrote it for her nephew’s son after his father was killed in an accident. Because he was not “satisfied with books that used metaphors” or that “only hinted at the gaping wound in his heart,” she wrote a book “without metaphors and without hints.”<sup>13</sup>

### PERSPECTIVES

Napoli's protagonists think critically and question established beliefs and traditions. She uses the strategy of setting up a debate—sometimes an internal debate, other times a debate between two or more protagonists—in which different sides of an issue are presented, showing how her protagonists reason things out. In her young adult novel *Breath*, for example, Napoli shows the value of logical reasoning as Salz uncovers the false assumptions that have been made about the relationship between the rats and the illness that plagues Hameln.

Napoli emphasizes the importance of relationships in all her novels. Value is placed on family relationships, including the relationship between fathers and sons. Relationships are shown in her novels to be an important aspect of love and romance. Napoli is a feminist, although she points out the term *feminist* can mean many different things. She sees it as a more “wide-open eyes” way of looking at things. In explaining her perspective, she gives an example of how she explores gender by talking about her character Mogo in her novel for children *Mogo, the Third Warthog*. She tells the story from the point of view of Mogo, the third little pig, who is “the most nurturing little guy in the world.” She was really interested in thinking how it would be for Mogo to be “kicked out” from his “sounder” (family group), which really happens in the wild; male warthogs are forced to leave their family group and live in their own burrows when they are two years old. She imagines how miserable he would be and how if “you were a nice guy you would want to be with others.” The males live, she says, “lonely lives.” In the book, Mogo wants to be back with his family and, failing that, wants to live with his brothers (who are killed) or to attach himself to another sounder. He is courageous and smart enough to learn how to survive his dangerous environment, but, Napoli says, “if you can take care of yourself, you probably want to take care of others,” and he falls in love with a young female warthog and guards her sounder from a distance (Napoli, author interview). But Mogo was not the first animal character that Napoli has created in which stereotypes of masculinity are broken, or at least bent to present an expanded view of masculinity. In her earlier novel *The Prince of the Pond*, the transformed prince is determined to nurture his tadpoles until they are old enough to care for themselves. In her young adult novels, Napoli presents male protagonists who are not only courageous but also depicted as loving and caring young men who protect and nurture others.

Napoli also challenges gender stereotypes and sexist discourses in her stories by showing the importance of equality and interdependence in gendered relationships; by showing how male and female protagonists positioned in patriarchal societies push against constraints of gender; by unmasking inequalities of class and gender; by placing value on the mother-daughter relationship and the loving connection between daughters and mothers; and by drawing attention to women's relationship to language and education.

### LANGUAGE MATTERS

Napoli speaks of her love for languages and tells how she was exposed to Latin, Hebrew, Calabrese, Napoletano, Yiddish, and Spanish as she grew up. In *Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Thinking about Language*, she writes about the effect of being exposed to different languages and "regional variations of American English" and documents the many languages and variations that her oldest daughter, Elena, encountered as they moved from place to place. They lived, for example, in Mount Pleasant, Washington, D.C., where her friends spoke "Korean, the Spanish of El Salvador, and African American English." When the family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, Elena's best friends' "native languages were Swedish and Japanese." Her summers were spent in Italy, and she learned "Spanish and Latin all through high school."<sup>14</sup> As someone who has degrees in and teaches linguistics, it is not surprising that Napoli draws attention to language and dialects in her novels for young adults. In an author's note on language in *Beast*, for example, she writes in detail about the uses and spelling of Farsi and Arabic. "Language is the fabric of culture," Napoli reminds her readers, and she encourages them to study both ancient and modern languages in high school (*Beast*, 260).

In *Language Matters*, an accessible guide for young adults, Napoli addresses questions that are often asked about language. For example, "Are sign languages real languages?" "Do animals have language?" and "Can computers learn language?" She discusses in this book issues regarding the use of standard English and language discrimination and addresses misconceptions about dialects and creoles. In regard to her own writing, Napoli sometimes feels that her interest in language works to "almost undercut" her because she has been criticized by some reviewers for

the inclusion of dialects in her novels. Once, she says, you put language “down on paper so that your reader can hear it, you run the risk of people saying that it is your stereotype.” This issue was of particular concern to her in writing *Alligator Bayou*, in which she uses the rural speech of both black and white communities. She now includes notes on how she has researched language and dialects (Napoli, author interview).

In answer to a question on what she would like to convey to young people about the use of language, Napoli says that “we do things with language that we don’t even know we’re doing [because] so much comes across” through language. She gives the example of listening to a person on the telephone, and how we make assumptions after a few sentences about that person. She makes the point that “one of the things that we don’t pay attention to is that lots of times we judge people by the way” they talk, and that “affects how we treat a person in various ways.” She says she likes to put “characters in situations where they have to pay attention to language; either it’s not their language or, somehow, there’s something odd about the language; they’re struggling somehow.” She points out that “it opens your eyes if you have to put yourself in other situations so that maybe the next time when you’re with someone who doesn’t speak as you do, you won’t necessarily make the assumptions that you might have otherwise made.” She loves linguistics; it is a “great field,” and she wishes that everyone could take an introduction to linguistics course. “It would change,” she says, “a lot how we relate to each other” (Napoli, author interview).

Napoli writes as passionately about issues surrounding the censorship of language and literature for children and young adults in *Language Matters* as she does about young people’s right to read about difficult topics. She observes that there are two common misconceptions that she has to deal with as a linguist and as a writer of fiction for children. One of the biggest misconceptions is that “some language is correct, but other language isn’t,” and she gives examples of language use that editors typically modify, although linguistically, such usage is “perfectly grammatical for some speakers.” The second more important misconception is the belief that “some language is dangerous and doesn’t belong in children’s books, especially not coming out of children’s mouths” (*Language*, 180). In debunking this misconception, she lays out her own “position statement against censorship” in which she stresses that “language is a basic human need, and, therefore, a basic human right,” and this “right must be protected from censorship” (*Language*, 180–181). “Language,” she writes, “is

a fundamental way of organizing the expression of our experiences, both external and internal.” She writes of the “creative” and “artistic faculty” of writing and that they are “artistic outlets available to every level of society, including our most powerless—our children. For this reason alone, the creative faculty of language should be ever more vigilantly protected” (*Language*, 181). Napoli also debunks the idea that the use of so-called offensive language or literature is harmful to children. She writes:

The child who is deprived of reading a scene through to its end; who is deprived of hearing the ring of real discourse in moments of terror, desperation, anger, or, indeed, of love and joy; and who is deprived of experiencing the thrills that the protagonists of stories feel—that is, the child who can read only censored material—loses the emotional insights and the truth of the story. (*Language*, 190–191)

Napoli is particularly involved in work with deaf children and their rights. She is working on “developing reading materials” to help deaf children learn to read in North America (for American Sign Language) and in Italy (for lingua dei segni italiana—LIS).<sup>15</sup> She has worked with people to develop guidelines for parents of deaf newborns and newly deaf children (Napoli, author interview). She writes and has held conferences on issues related to language and deafness. She has written picture books with sign language.

## ART MATTERS

Napoli and other family members are very involved with the arts. Napoli is a dancer. Dancing was a “major part” of her life when she was at college in Boston, and she “performed in dance concerts” (Napoli, SAAS, 168). She also makes ceramics. Her daughter Elena is a studio arts major and drew the maps in her mother’s books, including the map in *Hush* (Napoli, author interview). Elena has also co-authored a picture book with her mother about a young girl who is shown the different ways she can express herself through art by an Aboriginal artist.<sup>16</sup> Napoli’s interest in the arts is visible in her young adult novels. She became interested in spinning and weaving when she was writing *Spinners* (co-authored with Richard Tchen), in which Saskia is an artist spinner. The young woman in *Zel* is also an artist. The subject of Napoli’s novel *The Smile* is the story of the young girl

imagined to be the sitter for Leonardo da Vinci's portrait *Mona Lisa*. The setting of Florence in this novel is rich with details of art and architecture, as is the setting of Venice in her novels *Daughter of Venice* and *For the Love of Venice*. The beauty and function of art are brought into so many of Napoli's texts: the loveliness of a carved bowl in *The Magic Circle* or of a clay bowl in *Alligator Bayou*. "Art," she believes, "is a big thing that she really loves" and she "feels it should be part of everyone's life" (Napoli, author interview).

### THE WRITING PROCESS

Napoli explains that as a linguist with a degree in mathematics, she is an analytic thinker. Her work in linguistics is "highly formal," and she does not want "cold calculation" to take over her writing. She acknowledges that she cannot really shut off one part of her brain from another, but when she writes for young people her first concern is to write a story that will keep them turning the pages (Napoli, author interview). But in "What's Math Got to Do with It?," she also explains what she has learned from studying mathematics that she has found helpful as a writer. She has learned from mathematics that mistakes can be made by everyone, but with the help of friends, mistakes can be recognized and corrected. Mathematics is about brevity and clarity: A shorter and more "elegant" proof is one that goes directly to the "heart of the matter" ("What's Math," 62). Mathematics has a "tie-in" to the plotting of a story. "Every plot has its assumptions and its logic, and mathematics teaches one to uncover assumptions and to argue logically" ("What's Math," 64). The visual symmetry of geometry helps her to "recognize the patterns" in her stories ("What's Math," 66). She also learned persistence from a discipline in which focus and hard work is important. She kept on writing for fourteen years before an editor bought one of her stories. She was persistent in the way she practiced her craft, working long into the night and early in the morning while her family slept. Napoli brings together mathematical concepts and storytelling in picture books for young readers, including *How Hungry Are You?* and *Corkscrew Counts*, both of which are co-authored with mathematician Richard Tchen.

Napoli sees yet another area where mathematics and humanities converge. She explains that there is, for example, more than one solu-

tion “depending on how you define the elements that are to be operated on and the operations that manipulate them” (“What’s Math,” 63). This has helped her recognize that readers, from editors to children, will have different responses to her work. A strong component of Napoli’s work as a writer is her commitment to including readers in her writing process by visiting mostly elementary and middle schools, but sometimes high schools, to read her stories to student audiences. She does not put a book in front of people before it has been “vetted” by children or teens. She notes their responses and makes notes on any passages that do not hold their attention or need fine-tuning. The faces of younger students are so “loquacious,” she comments. As a children’s writer, she thinks it is important to read her work out loud for several reasons. If she “stumbles” then she knows the sentence needs to be rewritten. It also helps her with awkwardness in style, such as repetition of words and the rhymes of words that “jump out” and, therefore, sound “obnoxious.” Many of her young readers, Napoli points out, find reading a chore, and these readers are not “silent readers.” They are reading aloud; they are hearing the words. So, this means she must make sure that her writing sounds right.

Napoli now adopts a different strategy in obtaining teen responses to young adult novels after an experience of reading *Song of the Magdalene* to a class in high school in which a girl became upset while she was reading from the passage that includes a rape. Napoli offered to stop and give copies of the manuscript to those people who wanted it, but the girl insisted she go on with the story, which she did. Now she asks staff members and colleagues at her college whether they would be willing to let their teens read a manuscript that includes some “harsh scenes” in it. She acknowledges individual teen readers, for example, in her novel *Hush* (Napoli, author interview).

### A LOVER OF NATURE AND A TRAVELER

Napoli mentions on her website that she “dreams of moving to the woods and becoming a naturalist.”<sup>17</sup> No matter where Napoli sets her novels, there is a strong sense of environment through accurate descriptions of plant, animal, and bird life. Her accurate descriptions of frogs and the ecology of the pond are singled out in reviews of *The Prince of the Pond: Otherwise Known as De Fawg Pin*. Napoli uses her knowledge of speech

to produce the transformed prince's efforts to speak with his extra-long tongue. She has co-authored a picture book with her daughter Eva, "a mother-and-daughter writing team who happen to know a lot about bonobos."<sup>18</sup> Her son Robert is a "birder," and, indeed, birds appear in her texts more often than not, from the character Pigeon Pigeon in *Zel*, to the significance of birds for Melkorka in *Hush*, to the picture book *Albert*, which features a red cardinal that builds its nest in Albert's hand. In a story that combines fantasy with realism, *Albert* is the celebration of the experience of oneness with the natural world.

Napoli has traveled extensively and has taught in the summer at universities in Australia, Beijing, South Africa, and Switzerland as well as spending summers in Italy. Much of her research for her books is undertaken while abroad. She enjoys research and speaks especially of the research she did studying lions for *Beast*.<sup>19</sup> After the publication of *Beast*, which has been translated into Farsi, she was invited to Iran in 2005 as guest of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance to speak at the First International Children's Literature Festival at Kerman. In "Inside Iran," Napoli describes the Iran she saw with her husband. Her descriptions, as they are in her novels, are full of rich details as she notes the art, architecture, and everyday scenes of the places they visited. Iran, Napoli observed, "is a country of orality. Songs live. And the storytelling tradition lives."<sup>20</sup>

In an article written for *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Napoli urges teens to write for the joy of writing and to tell stories. "If we don't create art, that need goes begging, impoverishing our souls." She ends, "Be persistent. Be joyful. And be kind to yourself: write" (Napoli, "On Writing," 377). Napoli does just that.

## NOTES

1. All quotes from *The King of Mulberry Street* are from the paperback edition.
2. Donna Jo Napoli, interview with author, March 14, 2008. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, author interview.
3. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, November 19, 2009.
4. Donna Jo Napoli, *Something about the Author: Autobiography Series*, vol. 23 (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1997), 164. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, SAAS.

5. Donna Jo Napoli, "What's Math Got to Do with It?" *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 77, no. 1 (January/February 2001), 61. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, "What's Math."

6. Donna Jo Napoli, "Donna Jo Napoli, 1948" in *Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*, ed. Connie E. Rockman (New York: Wilson, 2000), 393. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, *Eighth*.

7. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, November 19, 2009.

8. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, November 7, 2009.

9. Donna Jo Napoli, "On Writing as an Art and a Need," *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, 6th ed., ed. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson (New York: Longman, 2001), 277. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, "On Writing."

10. Patty Campbell, "Looking at the Flip Side with Donna Jo Napoli," personal copy, 3.

11. Donna Jo Napoli, "Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories," *The ALAN Review*, vol. 25, no. 1 (fall 1997), 2. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, "Fairy Tales."

12. Michael Cart, review of *Breath, Booklist*, vol. 100, no. 2 (September 15, 2003), 232.

13. Donna Jo Napoli, *Flamingo Dream*, illus. Cathie Felstead (New York: Greenwillow Books, 2002).

14. Donna Jo Napoli, *Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions about Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, *Language*.

15. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, November 6, 2009.

16. Donna Jo Napoli and Elena Furrow, *Ready to Dream* (New York: Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2009).

17. Donna Jo Napoli's official website, [www.donnajonapoli.com/biography.html](http://www.donnajonapoli.com/biography.html) (accessed 11/23/2009).

18. Donna Jo Napoli and Eva Furrow, *Bobby the Bold* (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2006), back flap.

19. Donna Jo Napoli, interview by Tammy Currier, December 6, 2000, Teenreads.com, [www.teenreads.com/authors/au-napoli-donna.asp](http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-napoli-donna.asp) (accessed 11/14/2009).

20. Donna Jo Napoli, Inside Iran, [www.swarthmore.edu/news/iran/index.html](http://www.swarthmore.edu/news/iran/index.html) (accessed 11/23/2009).



## Chapter Two

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# Witch Mothers: *The Magic Circle* and *Zel*

NAPOLI IS PARTICULARLY KNOWN FOR HER RETELLINGS of fairy tales. In *The Prince of the Pond: Otherwise Known as De Fawg Pin*, a novel for middle-grade readers, Napoli uses narrative strategies that she would later employ in retelling traditional tales for young adults. In these stories, Napoli brings new meaning to old tales. She develops traditional fairy tale protagonists into complex characters, subverts stereotypical representations of male and female protagonists, and re-envisions gender relationships. She makes visible the social and gender ideologies, values, and belief systems relevant to each novel's setting but also brings into her texts alternative values to those in the original tales.

Rosemary Jackson writes how traditional tales are “neutral, impersonalized, set apart from the reader.”<sup>1</sup> Napoli uses a variety of narrative techniques to subvert the omniscient narrator of fairy tales, from her use of first person (as in *The Magic Circle*) to an anonymous narrator who speaks from the perspective of a protagonist (as in *Bound*). In other novels, Napoli employs a plural narrative. In *Zel*, for example, the first-person narration of the witch mother alternates with an anonymous narrator who focuses the story through the perspectives of the daughter, Zel, and Konrad, a young count. Napoli also positions her readers so that they experience the story from other perspectives, often, for example, writing from the point of view of those who are considered outsiders in fairy tales: the witch, the Beast, the twisted figure of Rumpelstiltskin. As Roberta Seelinger Trites points out in *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, the importance of giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced

and objectified has been a particular emphasis in feminist novels for young people.<sup>2</sup> Napoli also changes the “once upon a time” of fairy tale by her use of the present tense. This strategy enables readers to engage with protagonists’ experiences as, for example, in *Beast* when a Persian prince wakes to find that he has been metamorphosed into a lion. Amie A. Doughty writes that Napoli’s present tense works to bring a sense of “timelessness” to her narrative appropriate to the telling of folktales.<sup>3</sup> Doughty also makes the case that Napoli’s narratives “with their immediacy and vividness, bring the audience a fascinating bridge between the oral and the written.” Her novels are “storytelling events as well as novels” because “they embody the vividness, the representative nature of the oral event, while being in a written form” (Doughty, 114). In *The Magic Circle* and *Zel*, Napoli releases and intensifies the passions that are embedded in the texts of the traditional tales. She “explores,” as Doughty states, “the darker, dramatic elements of the tales” (Doughty, 32).

### WITCH MOTHERS IN *THE MAGIC CIRCLE* AND *ZEL*

In her retellings of “Hansel and Gretel” and “Rapunzel,” Napoli invites readers to think about witch protagonists and their relationship to good and evil. In *The Magic Circle* and *Zel*, she de-mystifies the witch figure of fairy tale by telling the story from the perspectives of women who become witches through bargains that almost destroy their souls. In her study of the representations of witches in history and literature, Diane Purkiss writes that we “rarely think of witches in connection with agency.” Defining agency as “the power to shape one’s life and story,” Purkiss observes that “being accused of witchcraft is thought to remove your identity and replace it with one that is not of your choosing.”<sup>4</sup> This lack of voice and ability to represent oneself is particularly noticeable in representations of witches who are vilified in traditional tales. In Napoli’s retellings, witches are given agency to tell their own stories like some women accused of witchcraft, who, Purkiss reports, “shaped their own stories” through “confessionals” (Purkiss, 145). Through their first-person narratives, Napoli’s witch protagonists choose what to tell about themselves. As Napoli’s witch mother says in *The Magic Circle*, she has always “understood perspective” and reveals only what others need to know (*The Magic Circle*, 95).<sup>5</sup> But her narrative, like that of Napoli’s witch mother in *Zel*, has its own force as

she reveals her innermost thoughts and emotions. In both novels, readers are invited to empathize with a witch's path toward damnation.

In a review of *The Magic Circle*, Betsy Hearne comments that Napoli's novel is "in many ways a groundbreaking book" that treats "demonic evil seriously" and flies "in the face of politically correct revisionist history about women falsely accused of witchcraft."<sup>6</sup> Asked whether she was writing from a feminist stance in writing *The Magic Circle*, Napoli says she is "so feminist" that she finds the word almost "meaningless." Whereas, she continues, "if you are just a humanist—if you just look at things with open eyes then you're going to take all people for what they do and how they behave. You are not going to take them for these other things." She says that when she looks at history and is writing about a midwife and reading about midwives, "the situation is X" and she "presents X"—and "if that looks like a feminist take on it," she does not "feel it is a feminist take" but sees it as "just a wide-open eyes looking"—observing what really was going on. "It just feels," she says, "like it's truth."<sup>7</sup>

Napoli leads the reader into a world in which the belief that witches exist and have power to communicate with devils is embedded in the culture by setting her retellings in medieval contexts, where belief in witchcraft and demonic forces exists along with religious belief. Napoli restores the real fear of witches to the story that Purkiss argues has been lost because of the sanitization of the witch in modern times (Purkiss, 282). Witches in *The Magic Circle* and *Zel* have power that they either use or choose not to use. Building upon characteristics of the witch in traditional fairy tales, Napoli probes deeply into the inner psyches of her witch protagonists and lays bare the souls of women who love their daughters, struggle with temptation, make evil bargains with devils, and finally, make choices that bring them redemption. It is their inner journeys into darkness when witch mothers are conflicted between faith and sorcery that make Napoli's retellings so powerful.

### ***THE MAGIC CIRCLE: A MIDWIFE'S PERSPECTIVE***

Napoli explains that the motive for writing *The Magic Circle* came from a question by her daughter, who asked why there were "so many wicked witches and evil stepmothers in fairy tales, but no wicked warlocks and evil stepfathers?" Napoli writes that her "little feminist heart beat hard"

and that she searched through the fairy tales she knew, looking “for the worst woman character” she could find. “There she was: the witch in Hansel and Gretel.”<sup>8</sup> In Napoli’s revision, the plot of the traditional fairy tale is restructured so that the story begins with, and focuses on, the figure of the witch, who tells her own story. Napoli notes that some readers do not recognize her novel as a Hansel and Gretel tale until the part of the story where the children are whispering outside the witch’s candy-decorated cabin (Napoli).

The witch had not always been a witch, and *The Magic Circle* begins with the voice of “the Ugly One,” who has been the village midwife for nine years. Napoli brings together the connection between midwives and witchcraft that has been widely disseminated in literature and in popular histories. She presents a midwife protagonist who, at the beginning of the novel, performs her midwifery skills while professing her faith in God. She is given some of the traits that Purkiss identifies as popularly associated with the midwife/witch: hands that heal, knowledge of medicinal herbs, and knowledge that can be passed from mother to daughter (Purkiss, 7). Given the name of the Ugly One by her neighbor, Bala, she does not divulge her real name but informs the reader that she is from the northern plains, where she lived with her mother, who handed down to her a knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs. Her daughter, Asa, whose father is the Patient Scholar, was born in the same month as her grandmother and shares her name.

Before the Ugly One is transformed into a witch, she has characteristics associated with the witch of fairy tale. The Ugly One makes references to a wart that she scrapes from her elbow and to her stoop caused by a “twisted back” (*The Magic Circle*, 6). She is an outsider, and it has taken her a long time, she explains, to fit into the village where she lives and works. As midwife and, later, as a healer/sorceress, she is anxious to avoid the suspicion of being “other.” She tells Bala (and the reader) as little as possible about her background, for she does not want Bala to be reminded that she has “different blood” in her (*The Magic Circle*, 4). She states that she is a “simple midwife” (*The Magic Circle*, 11); but she is, in fact, an educated woman, for she also divulges that her mother had taken her to a scholar (the Patient Scholar) to learn to read. In answer to Bala’s observations that her mother “did many unusual things,” the Ugly One answers that she is an “ordinary peasant” like Bala (*The Magic Circle*, 47). But it is

clear from the Ugly One's own narrative and from the skills she possesses that she is far from ordinary.

Napoli emphasizes the importance of voice and perspective throughout the novel. Napoli draws attention, for example, to the restricted perspective and limited knowledge of the Ugly One through the questions she asks herself about Bala, who draws her further into temptation by praising her skills and encouraging her to be a sorceress. She banishes a "vision" of Bala as a starling in the next life because this would imply Bala had no soul, and she does not wish to think ill of her since "animals have no souls" (*The Magic Circle*, 46). Later, toward the end of the novel, her suspicion would seem to be valid, as an incident with a starling is the precursor to the arrival of the children, who will also be a source of temptation. The Ugly One notices that Bala moves "silently" across the grass and wonders "if she has flown" (*The Magic Circle*, 46). She thinks about how a "simple permutation of letters turns one into the other" (*The Magic Circle*, 48). Later, she wonders whether Bala is "the incarnation of the demon, Baal" (*The Magic Circle*, 59). Napoli constructs the Ugly One's narrative so as to invite readers to go beyond her perspective and to think for themselves about Bala's role in the story.

The representation of the witch-like Bala is contrasted to that of the midwife. Napoli associates the Ugly One with qualities of beauty and love that belie the name given to her. "How did such an ugly one as you get such an eye for beauty," asks Bala (*The Magic Circle*, 3). As the Ugly One, and later, as a witch, Napoli's protagonist has a love of beautiful objects with which she decorates her cabin. Bala also asks how she came to have "such a beautiful daughter" (*The Magic Circle*, 4). When she is berated by Bala for accepting a ribbon for her daughter as payment for her midwifery skills, the Ugly One tells her that "beauty is not dangerous to those who truly love God" (*The Magic Circle*, 3). Through her first-person narrative, a reader is taken inside the thoughts and emotions of a woman who loves her beautiful daughter with a tender passion and who wishes to shower her daughter with jewels. The facade of the evil witch in fairy tale is fractured by the Ugly One's inner conviction that she is an "agent of God" (*The Magic Circle*, 46). As a midwife, she associates her healing hands with the hands of God. When she goes to help the wife of a nobleman, she states that she is "ready for those hands to close over me, to envelop me in the love that has no bounds" (*The Magic Circle*, 6).

### An Inner Dialogue

When her neighbor, Bala, insists that the midwife is capable of taking on the wider role of healer, which involves dealing with the devils that accompany illness, she takes up the challenge and begins a new and “dangerous journey” (*The Magic Circle*, 13). It is a journey into darkness. She confronts the boundaries between good and evil as she draws a magic circle to separate herself from the devils who wish to draw her outside the circle’s protection so that she may serve them. “You are a woman of God,” Bala tells her. “You can chase devils away” (*The Magic Circle*, 11). This is the beginning of a dialogue between good and evil that dominates Napoli’s novel. It is heard through the voices of other characters but especially in the inner dialogues of Napoli’s protagonist. Jackson writes that a characteristic of modern fantasy is the concept of a “circle of self” that can “generate its own power of destruction and metamorphoses.” The “source of otherness, of threat” is, therefore, “in the *self*” rather than externalized (Jackson, 58). Because events are seen from the perspective of the protagonist, a reader may question the extent to which the demonic is internalized only within the thoughts of the Ugly One. The voices of demons are heard only as they bypass her ears and speak inside her head. Toward the end of the novel, Napoli’s witch describes herself as holding her hands to her head as she listens to the taunting voices and laughter of devils.

The boundaries between good and evil are shown to be unstable, uncertain. The healer/sorceress is asked by the boy, Peter—whom she saves from death by performing a tracheotomy while bidding the devil, Astoreth, to leave his body—how it is she knows “what is the work of God and what is the work of devils” (*The Magic Circle*, 33). It is a troubling question. She must, she worries later, “be able to discern the difference or I may run afoul of God. Who am I to think I have the wisdom to tell the difference?” (*The Magic Circle*, 42). Napoli reveals the slippage in the Ugly One’s thinking. She says she cherishes the “safety of humility” (*The Magic Circle*, 45). In competing inner dialogues, her belief in her humility is undermined by her pride in self. When, for example, under Bala’s instructions, she first draws a magic circle and only narrowly escapes being lured out of the protection of the circle by a devil disguised as a bleeding child, she rejoices: “I have met the devil and survived. Were I a Catholic priest, I would now be an exorcist. But I am only a peasant woman. I am a sorceress” (*The Magic Circle*, 25). She catches herself on occasion: “I feel proud of myself for being so shrewd. Then I quickly repent of my pride. It

is God's shrewdness, not my own, that speaks from my lips" (*The Magic Circle*, 29). She is conscious that she is close to being too proud, but her self-deception is made visible when she calls herself a "treasure" and likens herself to "one of God's jewels" (*The Magic Circle*, 46). She trusts, she says, in the potency of the amethyst, which she uses to draw her magic circle to ward off the "drunkenness" of power (*The Magic Circle*, 29).

The midwife/sorceress's pride, her love and need for beautiful things, and her desire to provide Asa with jewels come together in a scene of anguish and temptation. Asked to rid a newborn of an extra finger, she draws the magic circle, not because she thinks she needs it (because she can bite the finger off without summoning the three-headed devil, Baal), but to show the baby's father, a baron, that she is using her powers as a sorceress. But with the appearance of a gold ring just outside the circle, she reveals the extent to which hubris has overtaken humility. She conflates the holiness of the sacred with the beauty of gold. The gold ring has an "essence" that is "holy" and shines "with heavenly beauty" (*The Magic Circle*, 51). She wants the "purest mineral of all to mark" her "purest of souls." She wants to "see this ring adorn" her own "heavenly beauty" (*The Magic Circle*, 51-52). Overly confident, she now believes that she cannot be harmed by devils because of her purity. She crosses over the border to retrieve the ring, which she now sees is for Asa, and steps into the evil awaiting her. She is immediately proclaimed by taunting devils as "the Ugly Witch" (*The Magic Circle*, 53).

### **The Burning of a Witch**

In grim scenes, the hysteria of witch hunts and trials is evoked as the community members arrive in response to the baron's men's accusations that she is a witch and to their cries that she should be burned. The opposition between witchcraft and institutionalized religion is shown by the arrival of the pastor of Wurzburg Cathedral, who claims to speak for God. The claim that "the witch-craze was caused by the attempt on the part of the rising male medical professionals to take over and control the regulation of women's bodies" (Purkiss, 19) is represented through the voice of the pastor, who speaks to the threat that "this ill-intended midwife" poses for "our real and verified surgeons" (*The Magic Circle*, 58-59). Napoli makes visible the way in which misogyny works against those women who step out of the circle of their prescribed place and against those women

who are different. The Ugly One notes that she is denounced as a witch by a woman whom she helped as a midwife, but who is not a Christian and, therefore, is afraid of being suspected as a witch. She notes how the women watching are less fearful once the fire is lit and relieved that they have escaped the “danger of the frivolous denunciation” to which “all women” are subject. She would, she laments, “give anything to burn here as a holy woman, falsely accused, rather than as the witch” she knows she is (*The Magic Circle*, 61).

The witch’s body becomes a site of fear and pain as a representative of the clergy searches her body for signs associated with witches and finds a black mole that spreads into others in the shape of a star with eight points. A large pin is stabbed into an old scar on her thigh to ascertain whether she bleeds. Using vivid language, Napoli re-creates the horror of the witch trial and the punishment of burning by fire. Asa, as the Ugly Witch’s daughter, is also suspect. She will “burn,” her “blood will boil. Her eyes will burst. Her skin will split,” the devils’ voices tell the Ugly Witch (*The Magic Circle*, 62). She can make a bargain: allow herself to be saved from the fire by being transformed into a salamander and to work for them, and Asa will be saved from this insufferable death. When she herself is put to the fire, she describes the pain and the peeling of her skin until she shape-shifts and crawls away. The pain and suffering of the Ugly Witch’s body are matched by the torment of her soul as she agrees to the devil’s “evil trade.” She is now “polluted.” She is “wicked” (*The Magic Circle*, 63). Once transformed into a witch, she has no blood, she has iron teeth, and she can shed no tears. As a witch, she also possesses those attributes associated with wicked witches: the power to transform into other shapes, the power to summon devils who also command her, and the desire to satiate herself with the flesh and blood of children.

The Ugly Witch flees to a “land full of enchanted forest” where, she says, she can isolate herself so that she will never do evil at the behest of demons (*The Magic Circle*, 66). Napoli uses the setting of an enchanted forest for the part of the novel in which she incorporates familiar elements of the Hansel and Gretel tale. Maria Tatar points out that the beginning of the Hansel and Gretel tale is “largely realistic, if also melodramatic,” for parents did abandon children. However, once the children enter “the forest, they find themselves in a world that not only admits the supernatural, but also takes it completely for granted.”<sup>9</sup> Napoli retains this division of setting while also separating the forest from the

world in which the Ugly One was a midwife. Here in the forest she is all witch. She builds a log cabin and decorates it with candy made from beet syrup. She says that the candy decorations are reminders of Asa, who had preserved the green chocolate mints she had received as gifts by lacquering them. She had decorated the outside of their cabin with them, saying that they could pretend they were living in a “candy house”—an early textual clue to the Hansel and Gretel tale (*The Magic Circle*, 10). The Ugly Witch still has her desire for beauty as she describes her pleasure in seeing the different hues of the red and pink candy: “Luscious rose brittles capture the light in air bubbles that seem to move on a sunny day” (*The Magic Circle*, 69).

### “Hansel and Gretel”

One of the most familiar versions of the Hansel and Gretel tale is found in Iona and Peter Opie’s *The Classic Fairy Tales*. The text is an “anonymous translation that appeared in *Household Stories Collected by the Brothers Grimm* published by Addy and Co.” in 1853.<sup>10</sup> The Hansel and Gretel tale is the “best known of a group of stories in which two children are victims of their own and their parents’ terrible hunger” (Purkiss, 277). In the Grimm version, collected by the Opies, Hansel and Gretel arrive, tired and hungry, at the witch’s cottage built out of “bread and cakes” with “window-panes” of “clear sugar” (Opie, 242). Once Hansel and Gretel have satisfied their initial hunger by taking large bites from the house, the witch invites them inside and provides them with nourishing food such as “milk and pancakes, with sugar, apples, and nuts” (Opie, 242). Purkiss argues that such foods would represent “a feast to the peasantry, especially in time of famine” (Purkiss, 278). The witch in the Grimm version treats them with kindness, “but in reality she was a wicked witch who waylaid children and built the bread-house in order to entice them in.” Once in “her power she killed them, cooked and ate them, and made a great festival of the day” (Opie, 242). She represents the devouring witch who, according to Tatar, “is a cannibalistic fiend masquerading as a magnanimous mother” (Tatar, 1987, 72). She is, writes Purkiss, the “antimother” (Purkiss, 278).

Napoli retains elements of the Grimm version pertaining to Hansel and Gretel prior to their arrival at the Ugly Witch’s candy-decorated log cabin. The bones of the traditional tale are retold through the voices of Hansel and Gretel, who recount their trials as abandoned children to the

witch after she has invited the tired and hungry children inside. The irony of the situation is highlighted as they speak of their “wicked stepmother,” who had attempted to get rid of them by sending them into the woods. She is a “real witch,” Hansel tells her with feeling (*The Magic Circle*, 83–84). Purkiss identifies in some more modern retellings a shift from understanding the Hansel and Gretel tale as one that evokes the fear that women once had of the power of the witch over food and households, to narratives that are concerned with “controlling and managing the ‘greed’ of children.” In these retellings, the “witch becomes the agent of the adults’ wish that greedy children should be punished” (Purkiss, 280). Napoli’s retelling does draw attention to the idea that the eating of candy might be viewed as greedy or sinful through Gretel’s references to the pastor’s warning that they “must deny pleasures of the flesh.” Gretel’s justification that she and Hansel are eating the candy out of necessity and not “choice” is enough for her to declare they are “not sinners” even as she savors the candy’s sweetness and thinks the “cottage” is like “heaven itself” (*The Magic Circle*, 79). Napoli retains the social context of the Grimm version. The children are clearly peasants whose clothes and descriptions of their home life speak to their poverty. The witch sees that they are starving when she opens her door for them and serves them endive soup rather than the luxury foods served by the witch in the Grimm version of the tale.

But there is an element of a masquerade, as there is in the Grimm text, for the Ugly Witch must pose as the good mother she wants to be (and used to be, as mother of Asa) in order to keep the children, to whom she becomes attached. Attention is drawn to this masquerade in Napoli’s text by a reference that is not included in the Grimm version. When the Ugly Witch sees the children eating the candy, she suddenly finds that she has a gentle, musical quality to her voice and sings a refrain that is from the *Faerie Tale Theatre* version of the Hansel and Gretel tale: “Nibble nibble like a mouse. Who is nibbling at my house?” (*The Magic Circle*, 80).<sup>11</sup> The refrain is similar to that used in Joan Walsh Anglund’s *Nibble Nibble Mousekin* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), which Virginia Walters describes as a version of the tale that is “all . . . sweetness and light.”<sup>12</sup> The refrain might serve to remind readers of versions of “Hansel and Gretel” in which evil is masked by the apparent sweetness of the witch. There is a lighter tone in the Ugly Witch’s voice in Napoli’s text as she narrates how she almost succeeds in her role as the good mother. After four weeks, she and the children have a semblance of normal family life in which the Ugly

Witch has built a loving relationship between herself and the children. Gretel now calls her “Mother.” The ring the Ugly Witch plays over her fingers is a ring of Hansel’s hair.

As in the Grimm version (although time is considerably lengthened), real evil is not far away—the difference being, of course, that Napoli’s witch protagonist works with a passion to keep her demons away. She keeps her house scrupulously clean, scouring it with vinegar, so as to rid the house of the spiders whom she believes are spying for devils. Reiterated in Napoli’s text is the concept that evil comes from within rather than without, as the Ugly Witch admits that she is still “poisoned with pride” because she had not succumbed to eating children. She had told the devils that she would “never, never, never” do their work (*The Magic Circle*, 71). The concept of the circle of self that can bring its own destruction is again invoked as the Ugly Witch’s pride and her love for Gretel, whom she regards as her daughter, and whom she wishes to array with jewels (as she had wished to decorate Asa), come together in her mind in a circling back of thoughts akin to those when she originally stepped outside the magic circle. The Ugly Witch believes, as she believed then, that she has guarded herself against devils. She has washed her hands until they are perfectly clean. Now, as then, the demons lie in wait for her. They begin as soon as she finds Gretel and Hansel discussing their return to their father on their discovery of her jewels. The demons tell her that the children are “delicious morsels of meat” (*The Magic Circle*, 102). “Eat them, eat them, eat them,” the voices scream at her when she later locks the children in the house (*The Magic Circle*, 105).

### **Redemption**

Re-created in the final scenes of the book is the full horror of the cannibalistic witch. In an act whose description bears traces of the grotesque, the Ugly Witch pulls down her tongue and bites it off so that it “flies across the room, wagging as it goes” so that she cannot tell Gretel the truth about her identity (*The Magic Circle*, 104). As in the Grimm tale, the witch keeps Hansel in a cage. But Napoli depicts a woman desperately fighting against the real evil that she and Gretel know exist. The voices are vociferous and increasingly take over her thoughts as they tempt her into eating the children and making up for the nine years in which she has denied their demands. Her bargain with them to save Gretel’s life will fail, because once

she has eaten Hansel, she will not be able to resist the blood of children. She can, she says, “taste the hot, sweet blood” of “infants,” which is “flawlessly delicious” (*The Magic Circle*, 111). The wretchedness of a woman who voices her despair that she has lost out to the devils within, who know her every move, her every thought, is conveyed in riveting passages. She believes that the devils have “power” over her and that she is “doomed to eternal torment” (*The Magic Circle*, 111).

Napoli’s retelling is, at the close, a tale about redemption. Napoli brings new meanings to those passages in the Grimm text in which Gretel pushes a dangerous witch into the oven. The turning point for Napoli’s witch comes as she acknowledges the goodness and innocence of Gretel. She, similarly, acknowledges her own wickedness when she grasps and drops the amethyst, for she cannot touch “holy things” (*The Magic Circle*, 114). Her love for Gretel and the need for Gretel’s forgiveness is the catalyst that enables her to will Gretel to do what must be done. The final burning scene is a reversal of her first burning as she refuses to obey the voices of the devils to change once more into a salamander. She draws her final magic circle with the amethyst that Gretel thrusts into her hand and weeps as she dies “into the waiting hands of God” (*The Magic Circle*, 118). The last lines of the novel speak powerfully and poetically to her redemption by fire:

I am dying.  
Oh, glorious death.  
I am dying.  
Dying.  
Free. (*The Magic Circle*, 118)

In talking about *The Magic Circle*, Napoli comments that the novel “almost wrote itself.” It “almost felt like it was inevitable” so that when she finished, she felt like “Of course! Like, how on earth could a little girl push a witch into the oven if the witch did not want to be pushed into the oven. There were so many things that witch could have done.” She says, with a laugh, that to her, it is not “a story” but “that’s how it happened” (Napoli). The view of one reviewer that the witch’s personal narrative “renders her a compelling and entirely sympathetic figure” is one that was reiterated in other reviews.<sup>13</sup> Reviewers also refer to Napoli’s skilled use of perspective and to her powerful use of imagery.<sup>14</sup> *The Magic Circle* was chosen as a 1994 ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

*ZEL*

In *Zel*, a retelling of the Rapunzel tale, Napoli writes compellingly about another witch mother and her relationship with her daughter that is also centered on a mother's struggle with her faith and damnation. Neapolitan, French, and German variants of the Rapunzel tale include the tale "Petrosinella," which appeared in Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone* (1634–1636); Charlotte-Rose Caumont de la Force's literary tale "Persinette"; and a German version by Friedrich Schultz that was translated by the Brothers Grimm for their own retellings.<sup>15</sup> The Rapunzel tale was included in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812), but some changes were made to the tale in the 1857 edition. One of the main differences in versions of the tale, including modern picture book versions and retellings, is the representation of a woman as either an ogress, a *fée* (fairy), a sorceress, Mother Gothel, or an evil witch. Interpretations of a tale in which a mother bargains away her daughter for a particular herb or lettuce are equally varied.<sup>16</sup> Just as the Brothers Grimm encoded values about family for a bourgeoisie middle-class audience, so do present interpretations, retellings, and adaptations encode values and beliefs about mothers and mothering.

Napoli's retelling differs from the Grimm versions, and also from retellings based on their telling of the tale, in several respects. She develops a witch mother into a complex character who explains why she steals away a mother's newborn daughter in exchange for the rapunzel that grows in her garden, and why she decides to keep this daughter in a tower as she reaches puberty. Napoli emphasizes and strengthens the relationship between the witch mother and Zel so that it becomes central to the story. Retelling the Grimm version of the tale as a female coming-of-age story, Napoli writes of a young girl's maturation as she grows from puberty to being a sexually active young woman who, by the end of the novel (as in the Grimm tale), becomes a mother herself. Concomitant with Zel's story is a male coming-of-age story in which the prince of fairy tale is developed into the engaging unprince-like young count, Konrad, whose obsession for Zel equals that of her witch mother.

By using a plural narrative in which the story is also told from the perspectives of both Zel and Konrad by an anonymous narrator, Napoli fleshes out a folktale into a rich novel encompassing a triangular relationship among three protagonists. The first-person narrative of "Mother" is

counterbalanced by the chapters entitled “Zel” and “Konrad.” The novel is divided into eight parts, the last being “The Gathering,” in which the perspectives of all three protagonists come together under the chapter heading “All.” Setting her novel in Switzerland in the mid-1500s, Napoli incorporates belief systems and ideologies of class and gender that are appropriate for that time and place, including beliefs in astronomy and the belief in witches and witchcraft that co-exists with religious faith.

### **A Barren Woman**

It is not until part IV of the novel, entitled “Obsessed,” that Napoli incorporates familiar elements from the Rapunzel tale. Only when Zel’s witch mother questions her own actions in holding the daughter she so loves in the tower does she reveal the story behind how she became Zel’s mother. She distances the story by speaking of the woman, the “good” and “barren” woman who had procured a daughter through an evil trade. She presents this woman as one who tried to live without a child, first by caring for other children and then by avoiding them and living the life of a seamstress. But the “woman needed, oh, how she needed, to be Mother. She needed it with every drop of blood, every bit of flesh, every hair, every breath of her body” (*Zel*, 126–127).

The voice that tells her that she can have what she desires comes, as in *The Magic Circle*, from within. It would be a simple bargain: She would receive a special skill with plants. In return, she is to persuade her future daughter, while the girl is still a virgin, to also become a witch. As Purkiss observes, witchcraft is associated with matriarchy and “mother-daughter learning” (Purkiss, 8). The price: “eternal damnation” (*Zel*, 128). As in *The Magic Circle*, there is a discourse between heaven and hell, faith and devils, salvation and damnation. When the woman receives no help from attending church, from praying, or by trying to communicate with the dead, she doubts her faith. She explains the logical steps by which she reaches her decision. “If heaven did not exist, hell did not either, for one defined the other.” If neither existed, then what, she reasoned, “was a soul?” (*Zel*, 130). In *Zel*, a woman deliberately makes a bargain with devilry, which, she reasons, is no bargain because there is nothing to lose either for herself or for her future daughter. But evil and damnation are shown to be very real in this novel, as in *The Magic Circle*. The practice of sorcery brings its unexpected and unwanted rewards, as she subsequently bites her flesh

and finds that water runs through her veins. She knows, she says, that heaven and hell exist. "Divinity was true. She had bargained away much, after all" (*Zel*, 136). She has forever to think about what she has done.

The soon-to-be witch in Napoli's story discovers the extent of her powers when her garden thrives and when she confronts the man who steals rapunzel for the wife she knows is pregnant. Napoli invests the tale with a menace and an evil absent from the 1957 Grimm version. Although the "enchantress" confronts the man with anger, her anger lessens when he tells her that his wife will die if he does not satisfy her craving for rapunzel. She tells him that he may take the rapunzel "on one condition": He must give the child to her, but she tells him, she will "take care [of] the child like a mother."<sup>17</sup> In Napoli's story, the woman surrounds and covers the husband with poisoned thistle "welts." She begins to feel pity for him but then sees his look of "revulsion" (*Zel*, 135). She makes her demand for the daughter his wife bears with coldness, makes no promises about caring for her, and causes the thistles to grow up to his face so that the tortured man gives in to her request. She uses her powers to prevent the husband speaking about his bargain by blocking his door with vines and covering his body and tongue with thistle poison. She takes the child at birth and keeps going until she can no longer hear the child's mother's wails. Reaching the end of the story of her past, she brings her story back to the present as she pronounces, "I am Mother" (*Zel*, 138).

### **Mother and Zel**

Napoli retains the basic narrative of the Rapunzel story that is similar to other fairy tale narratives in which a daughter's maternal mother is replaced by a stepmother. The sorceress figure in the Grimm tale is not, however, representative of the wicked stepmother of fairy tale. She might represent the fear of the witch who threatened the safety of the mother and order of the birthing room (Purkiss, 100–101) or the "child-stealing" witch found in other legends (Tatar, 2004, 58), but, in regard to the safety of the child, the sorceress promises Rapunzel's father that she will care for her. It is revealed that she visits the tower daily. Rapunzel's statement that the prince would love her "better than old Mother Gothel" implies she was shown some love by the sorceress (Grimm, 48). In her retelling, Napoli strengthens and emphasizes this tenuous connection into a powerful multidimensional relationship. A reader sees this relationship

from two sides: from the first-person narration of Mother and from the perspective of Zel.

The novel begins with Zel's excitement over a rare trip to the nearest town. In this chapter, Napoli's anonymous narrator allows the reader to observe Zel, who is described as a joyful, dancingly alive girl soon to celebrate her thirteenth birthday, being lovingly cared for by Mother as she braids her daughter's hair and admonishes her to eat a good breakfast. A reader also observes the witch mother's actions that might lead to the suspicion that she is more than an ordinary mother. The witch "sees" that the man who sells the melons that Zel loves will be in the marketplace; she causes raspberries to appear for Zel as they walk to town. Zel, however, is shown to be of an age where she is no longer so accepting of Mother. She asks her how she is able to perceive what is there with closed eyes. Napoli builds upon Mother's attributes as a witch throughout the text: her practice of sorcery, the way animals and people regard her with suspicious caution, her status as an outsider who lives on the margins of society and town. Zel, in contrast to her Mother, is looking forward to mingling with the people of the town, for Mother even sends away the local herd boys who stray too close to their hut on the alm (alpine meadow).

The split narrative highlights the differences between how Zel and Mother think about their situation and each other. In the following chapter, Mother describes how she feels about her relationship with Zel, using a language of daughter-mother bonding that praises the mother-daughter relationship. She states that she has "been enjoying the unity of Mother and Daughter, weaving through the crowds like a single strand of yarn." When she leaves Zel at the smithy, she feels a "sharp loss" but knows that the "separation is temporary" (*Zel*, 13). Zel, she believes, feels the same about their separation. "We will be together," Mother says. "Mother and Zel. Forever" (*Zel* 19).

As in the Grimm version of Rapunzel, a daughter's sexuality and meeting with a youth are shown to disrupt and change her relationship with a mother. On the return home from the town, Mother worries that Zel is already "furtive" after meeting Konrad (*Zel*, 59). Bruno Bettelheim reads the Grimm tale of Rapunzel as a story "of a pubertal girl, and of a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence," which he writes is "a typical adolescent problem."<sup>18</sup> The dread of a daughter's attachment to a young man is doubly reinforced in *Zel* by a mother's promise that she would persuade her daughter to eschew marriage and follow her path

into sorcery. But Zel refuses to be tempted by the gift her mother promises—the ability to communicate with animals. Her thoughts are with the youth she has met, and she cannot envisage living without a husband. She will not leave her mother, she tells her, but will take her along when she marries. The conflict felt by a mother who is determined to keep her daughter but needs her daughter to express that she will willingly choose to stay with her is heard in her statement that she must “not shackle Zel” to her and that Zel’s “love must be returned freely” (*Zel*, 61). Angry at the dreadful price she has to pay for the trade she had made, she lies to her beloved daughter and tells Zel that her life is threatened. She must take Zel away to a place of safety in an old tower that lies across the water and through the forest where, she believes, time will be on her side and she can persuade Zel to make the right choice. She tells Zel that she must keep her safe from an enemy.

Tatar sees the Rapunzel plot as an example of tales in which “prohibition” is paired with “violation,” in which the “command not to stray is symbolized by imprisonment in a tower” (Tatar, 1987, 166). Napoli follows the main plot of the Grimm version of the tale embellished with details. Mother imprisons Zel in the tower for two years, visiting every day with tasty parcels of food and braiding Zel’s increasingly long and heavy hair, which she causes to grow until she can climb up her braids to the tower. Even though she gives voice to her anguish, sense of loss, and “self-loathing” at seeing what she has done to her daughter, Mother believes that Zel will come to see that her mother is all that she needs. She cannot see how else she may prepare her daughter for the choice that she wishes her to make—a choice that becomes more urgent as Mother knows about and sees the youth, Konrad, who is searching for Zel.

The changes in Zel as time passes are shown through Mother’s eyes: Zel’s growing frustration; her growing argumentativeness, especially over her braids; her withdrawal and loss of expression. In the first angry confrontation between them (after Zel has first seen and spoken to Konrad in what she thinks is a “vision”), Zel throws the food Mother has brought her out of the window, sobs with dry eyes, talks about her visions, shakes her head violently, and screams until Mother slaps her. Mother expresses her anger and frustration as she sees Zel’s forehead covered with dried blood and finds the sharp stone, which Zel should not have because she is not well. She hears Zel talking “gibberish” and observes that she is “walking the edge of sanity” (*Zel*, 175). “*Something*

*must change*,” Mother says to herself as she returns to the alm (*Zel*, 176). In the last chapter entitled “Mother” in the novel, she admits that it is she “who reduced Zel to that raving girl” before she sets out for the tower on Zel’s birthday (*Zel*, 185).

In the final meeting between Zel and her Mother, they engage in a conversation of cross-talk and misunderstanding. Mother, suspicious of the smell and sound of a horse, speaks to Zel of matters of heaven and hell, of a choice and a gift that is passionate, of the passionate love between mother and child, and of a trade made for rapunzel. Zel, as she struggles to make sense of Mother’s confusing words, speaks of leaving the tower and of the “passion of lovers” (*Zel*, 197).

Unheard by Mother are Zel’s thoughts and emotions as Zel pleads with her eyes that Mother would really look at her and know her (*Zel*, 196). She acknowledges silently that Mother, whom she had earlier thought of as her protector, had “imprisoned” her and “betrayed” her (*Zel*, 200). The extent to which Zel’s thoughts are filled with Konrad as she engages with her mother is heard in a variation of those familiar phrases from the Grimm text in which Rapunzel compares Mother Gothel to the prince. Mother is “plumper” and “heavier,” she tells her, “thinking of Konrad” (*Zel*, 198). Unheard by Mother is Zel’s wish to share her joy over Konrad and her willingness to forgive her because she “was as good a mother as a mother could be, until she thought Zel would leave her” (*Zel*, 201). Napoli’s use of vivid visual imagery enables the reader to see from Mother’s perspective Zel’s lips as they “curl away from her teeth,” hear her “hiss of pain” and her voice “hard as a dagger blade” as she finally comes to understand that there was no enemy as she had understood it, and that the woman whom she called Mother had gotten her in exchange for rapunzel (*Zel*, 199). From Zel’s perspective Mother is seen with her back to the wall before sinking to the floor, as she tries to tell Zel why she had kept her in the tower.

Reproduced in Napoli’s text is all the rage and passion of the sorceress in the Grimm tale when she learns from Zel that when she spoke of “passion,” she spoke of Konrad. “I am the one who loves you. Me!” she tells Zel (*Zel*, 201). As in the Grimm text, Mother is, indeed, described as a witch mother as she bites off Zel’s braids with her teeth. She uses her power over plants as she causes Zel to be whipped away by the branches of forest trees in a passage that recalls the descriptions of Zel’s frenzied journey when she was carried to the tower. She gives voice to her sorrow and anger

at the loss of Zel in the chapter "Mother," where she reports how she had seen within Zel's womb the beginnings of her pregnancy. She utters the heartrending cry of a barren woman whose barrenness is contrasted with her daughter's fertility throughout the novel. She expresses the desperation and despair of a woman who has lost the daughter gained at the cost of losing her soul, and a daughter, moreover, who will bear children without having to pay the price she herself has paid: "Oh, God, what savage trick you played, to pick for barrenness a woman who couldn't bear to exist without a child" (*Zel*, 205).

As in *The Magic Circle*, there is a turning point for a witch protagonist in which she saves herself from damnation. It comes after Mother has waited for and confronted Count Konrad in the tower. She sees the sadness in Count Konrad's face and realizes that he is "her soulmate," for he also loves Zel (*Zel*, 207). In contrast to the Grimm text, Konrad's fall from the tower into the brambles that blind him signifies a witch's redemption as she causes the bushes to break his fall from the tower. The death of a witch mother mirrors that of the witch mother in *The Magic Circle* as she dies and loses her power. Konrad, like Gretel, survives. "He lives," Mother narrates. "I die" (*Zel*, 208). Referring to Napoli's plural narrative, Roger Sutton writes of the "stunning sequence of three encounters: between Zel and her prince, Zel and 'Mother,' and Mother and the prince in a struggle for the heart of Zel and life and death."<sup>19</sup>

### **Zel: A Daughter's Story**

Through chapters narrated from Zel's perspective, Zel is portrayed as a girl growing increasingly independent, especially after she meets Konrad, at the smithy where she holds and calms his horse, Metta. She does not, for example, hold her mother's hand on the way from the smithy. Back home on the alm, she takes it upon herself to perform tasks she had not done heretofore. There is "daring in her action" as she decides to punch "down" the rising dough; she adds raisins, and works the cheese press (*Zel*, 55). She asks Mother to tell her about her father. She is shown as being more sexually aware as she thinks of Konrad. "Her skin comes alive as she thinks of him" (*Zel*, 47). Zel hides rapunzel seeds—associated with fertility throughout the novel—under her bed so that she can grow the lettuce she loves so much—lettuce her mother refuses to grow. They are "her seeds. Her secret" (*Zel*, 58).

Napoli develops the portion of the tale telling of Rapunzel's imprisonment in the tower by showing in stark terms the effects of the psychological damage of keeping a young woman, who today would be regarded as an adolescent, in isolation. Napoli intensifies the grimness of the tower in comparison to other versions of Rapunzel, in which a sorceress or *fée* keeps a daughter in a silver tower in relative luxury.<sup>20</sup> Her witch mother has to run and cover her ears from the sound of Zel screaming as she leaves her in the dark, bare, stone room. Zel's descent into near madness after two years in the tower is harrowingly recorded from her perspective in the chapters entitled "Zel."

After one hundred days in the tower, Zel is missing the freedom of outside but still hopes that Mother will deal with the enemy that threatens her. She counts the hairs on her arm and the stones on the tower floor, and she draws and paints. Zel, who from the beginning of the novel is depicted as an artist, paints in colors with the paints that her witch mother supplies. She paints the flowers of summer, then the colors of the fall. She talks and shouts to a squirrel, but she is "alone and alone and alone" (*Zel*, 91). Desperate for company, she entices a pigeon, and even ants and lice, to share her prison (*Zel*, 155). The worsening of her psychological health shows as time passes and she no longer paints in colors. At first she wears the beautiful dress that her mother had made her for her thirteenth birthday, but she knows that her "womanhood" is being "wasted" (*Zel*, 151). After nearly two years in the tower, she is nearly fifteen years old. "She should be married," she thinks, "with child, baking bread and weaving cloth. She should not be alone" (*Zel*, 158). She begins to go naked in the tower, wearing the dress only for Mother's daily appearances. She throws her waste, including her monthly blood, through the window so that it lies around the tower. Her growing anger and frustration are vented in a drawing, messily executed, of goats mating—a drawing that she knows Mother will not like. She flings her companion, Pigeon Pigeon, off the windowsill of the tower with one of her braids when he stretches his wings—a symbol of the freedom she wishes to have.

Reproduced in Napoli's text are descriptions corresponding to contemporary stories of teenage girls who attempt to mutilate themselves as they experience the pain of adolescence. Zel "would take the sharp stone and dig trenches up the lengths of both arms. She would fill her room with blood" (*Zel*, 149). When cold, she wears a cloak and sometimes dances until her back is rubbed raw from the cloak's coarse material. She rolls and

bangs her head on the floor. "Pain is lovely" (*Zel*, 149). As in other feminist retellings of Rapunzel, Napoli fractures the association between Zel's hair and beauty. Her braids are a symbol of imprisonment and a mother's control. She asks her mother to use the tree next to the tower, which she had originally used when entering the tower room, rather than climb the braids that her mother has caused to grow, because they cause her such pain. The first sign of Zel's defiance is when she questions why the tree shrinks when her mother is not with her. It is to keep enemies away from the tower, Mother answers, but Zel inwardly thinks, "*And what would prevent me from climbing down?*" (*Zel*, 112). Conflict between a daughter and mother during the years now called adolescence grows as Zel chooses to talk about topics that annoy Mother.

Zel is described as hallucinating as she sees visions of goats in her tower room and visions of Konrad's horse, Meta, eating her mattress and tugging at her long, heavy braids until she feels that her skin will be ripped. The depiction of the young woman in the tower is far from the Rapunzel described in the Grimm text who passes the days by "letting her sweet voice resound in the forest" and whose song attracts a prince (Grimm, 48). When she stands naked on the windowsill launching a paper bird she has made and sees Konrad and Meta, she has difficulty, as Doughty points out, in distinguishing "reality from 'visions'" (Doughty, 113). For Zel, the "vision is new and so real, it hurts" (*Zel*, 161). When he reappears, she asks questions of Konrad that test her own sense of reality. "Amaze me, Oh superb vision!" she tells him (*Zel*, 166).

### Konrad

Napoli also reworks the Grimm version of the Rapunzel tale by constructing the story from the position of the prince and fleshing out his character into a young man who is very different from the cardboard figure of the prince of fairy tale. The day he meets Zel at the smithy changes Konrad from a somewhat imperious youth to one who becomes obsessed with a peasant girl who captures him by her bold spirit and looks, so that he sees her braids and her dark eyes wherever he goes. Her request for a goose egg in exchange for holding his horse steady for the smithy sets him, as it is narrated later, spinning. "Like the speck of life in the fertilized goose egg," Zel had "left a mark that changed him" (*Zel*, 72). Zel's fertility is contrasted to the barrenness of the goose who sits on stone eggs outside the hut on

the alm. The goose that runs through the story, together with Zel's concern for her, connects Zel to the goose girl of fairy tale whose true destiny is to marry Konrad, the young king.<sup>21</sup>

Konrad, the young count in Napoli's story, is constrained in a patriarchal society by expectations and responsibilities that come with his position, including marrying a woman of his father's choice. After meeting Zel, he refuses the betrothal that his father has arranged. His father sets out the diplomatic reasons why Konrad should marry the young duchess he has chosen. Konrad tells his angry father that he "cannot bend [his] life to meet the curves of [his] politics" (*Zel*, 71). Napoli makes visible the social and economic realities, frequently masked in traditional tales, that stand between the marriage of a peasant girl. Konrad is told by his parents that Zel will not be suitable for him. He is well-bred and well-educated, and a girl like Zel would not fit into his life.

Konrad is the antithesis of the jaunty young prince so often depicted in picture book versions as, defying his father and leaving his duties, he searches month after month, season after season for Zel. He displays the same obsession for rapunzel as Zel and her birthmother as he feasts nightly on the rapunzel he obtains from the vendor who had sold it to Zel and Mother. He is described by Zel's witch mother, when he finally appears at the door of the cottage on the alm, as a bedraggled, disoriented young man reeking of the wine he had spilled after spending the night, exhausted, on the forest floor. When he finally makes his entry into the tower, Rapunzel smells his sweating body and sees a young man with his face and shirt covered with the dirt he had used for camouflage.

The story of Konrad's search for Zel is also a male coming-of-age story. He is shown to mature and take responsibility for his duties as a young count when not searching for Zel by learning his father's business and participating in local politics. As with other male characters in her novels, Napoli gives Konrad qualities that present a rounded representation of masculinity. He displays compassion and humility—attributes that make princes into worthy heroes. He understands, before he finds Zel again in the tower, that the new young woman his parents have chosen for him will depend on him for her happiness and that he will have to give up his dreams of Zel and learn to love his wife. In contrast to the prince described in the Grimm tale, Konrad also displays all the courage and clearheadedness of a prince in action as he vows to fight Zel's captor. Konrad plans to return with a rope, in contrast to the Grimm tale in which the prince

will “bring a skein of silk,” each time he visits from which Rapunzel will “weave” a “ladder” (Grimm, 48). Far from the prince in the Grimm text who jumps in despair when he faces the sorceress in the tower, Konrad lunges at Mother with a dagger. But, perhaps, above all, Konrad signifies steadfastness and a relentless determination in a story in which obsession and passion are linked together throughout the text.

Napoli’s retelling reproduces all the passion of Konrad’s and Zel’s lovemaking in the tower, of which there is only a hint in the 1957 edition of the Grimm version in which the prince asks Rapunzel if she will “have him for her husband” (Grimm, 48). Zel and Konrad’s passionate night of love in the tower is told from the perspective of Konrad. Napoli uses a language rich in sensory images to describe Konrad’s experience of making love to Zel. He tastes, for example, “the heady maturity of ripe plums” (*Zel*, 180). Afterwards, Zel watches him as he dresses and remembers him after he leaves. “Her heart feels him. Her tongue tastes him” (*Zel*, 192). She “touches the stain on the sheet, her wedding sheet” and remembers their vow of love (*Zel*, 192).

### Reunited

Napoli retains elements of the basic plot of the Rapunzel tale in which Rapunzel is taken to a “desolate land,” gives birth to twins, and is eventually reunited with the prince who has “wandered for many years in misery,” and who is cured from his blindness by her falling tears (Grimm, 49). In Napoli’s retelling, the story is narrated from Zel’s perspective as she walks naked across a desert land enjoying the sense of freedom but also experiencing fear and anger until she reaches a land of colors and flowers where she is cared for and where she gives birth to twin girls. Here, she lives and helps the community with domestic tasks until Konrad arrives on Meta.

John Stephens writes that the “step-mother witch” in Napoli’s “exquisitely written retelling of the Rapunzel story” is “instrumental in returning the young lovers to the hegemony of a romantic outcome under patriarchy.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, as she does in all her retold fairy tales, Napoli constructs the relationship between a count and a young woman within the main boundaries of the narrative plot of the traditional tale and within the gender ideologies and belief systems of a particular social and historical context. Napoli, however, does deviate from the ending of the Grimm version in important ways. Zel’s witch mother, rather than absent or even

destroyed as in some retellings of the Grimm tale,<sup>23</sup> is present, if only in spirit, in the final chapter. Her voice interrupts the portions of the chapter that are narrated from the perspectives of Konrad and Zel in short lines in which she narrates that she no longer has powers but she sees “as though through a goose eye” (Zel, 220); and “listens as though through a man’s ears”(Zel, 226). It is her voice that describes the joyful reunion of Zel and Konrad as they kiss one another, and Zel’s tears, withheld over the years, are now released to heal his eyes. Mother narrates in jubilation: “And they see other, and, yes, oh, yes, we are happy” (Zel, 227).

Through telling the story from the positions of Mother, Zel, and Konrad, Napoli heightens the opposition set up between a daughter’s emotional bond with her mother and a daughter’s passionate love for her lover. But by the close of the novel, a possessive witch mother is transformed into a mother who can celebrate her daughter’s love for the young man who has captured her heart. Represented as a powerful and controlling mother, she has lost supernatural power as well as her power over Zel. Zel, in contrast to Mother, refuses supernatural power. She wishes only for the power of “understanding,” but Mother’s power, as Mother admits, was all about “control” (Zel, 141). The story of Zel’s relationship with her mother is also about forgiveness and her affirmation of the happy years with Mother, who had loved and taken good care of her. Zel does not forget those years in the tower and acknowledges that her mother was a witch. But looking at the good people around her, she believes that any one of them would “sell” their “soul for the right price” (Zel, 219). Hazel Rochman comments that “teens may not fully understand the childless woman’s yearning. What will move them profoundly is the pull of possessive love, the coming-of-age drama from the parent’s point of view. Above all, there’s the shocking realization that even the best of us, given the need, will sell her soul.”<sup>24</sup>

Mothers are absolved from blame as Zel also forgives the mother she never knew who had traded her away. Unknown by Zel, her birth mother had begged for her child not to be taken away and had “rent her clothes” (Zel, 141). It is an element of the story that is not included in the Grimms’ 1957 text but which is, sometimes, added to picture book versions of the tale as a way of encoding the natural love of a mother for her child. In a conversation about Zel’s forgiveness of her mother, Napoli comments that “children do forgive their parents”—even the most abused children—because “really, they don’t have a choice” because “if you can’t forgive your parents you are a lost person.” She continues: “You have to forgive those

closest to you.” In reference to *Bound*, her retelling of the Cinderella tale in which a girl is also treated badly by a stepmother, Napoli makes the point that if you allow yourself to think that a person you are depending on is a “monster then you are in a much worse situation” and says that she thinks “you have to protect yourself against those realizations” (Napoli).

Napoli affirms the bonds between daughter and mother that are severed in the Grimm tale—bonds that have also been de-centered in traditional accounts of adolescent psychology. Napoli writes about the power of this bond: the power of a mother’s love and a mother’s sacrifice, the power that a mother can exercise over her daughter, but also the power of a daughter’s love for her mother and a daughter’s forgiveness. In *The Magic Circle* and *Zel*, Napoli, who interweaves the themes of art and the artist in many of her novels, cements this mother-daughter bond in the passing down of treasured objects or a love of art and beauty from mother to daughter. In *The Magic Circle*, a bowl made from the “purity” of “white wood” and “a shrine to the memory of Asa” is passed on to Gretel (*The Magic Circle*, 72). Gretel’s cry of “Mother” as the witch burns in the oven at the end of the novel (*The Magic Circle*, 117) is a counterpart to Asa’s morning greeting to “Mother” as her midwife mother caresses her at the beginning of the novel (*The Magic Circle*, 1). In *Zel*, Mother had seen a lute that captivated her and thinks, “A woman will buy it for her daughter who will give it to her daughter who will give it to her daughter” (*Zel*, 14–15). Two small daughters follow their artist mother, Zel, in their love of painting as they decorate the stones they have collected.

Napoli’s retellings of the Rapunzel and Hansel and Gretel tales expand the traditional tales into novels that deal with issues of good and evil, love and passion, faith and redemption. In so doing, Napoli redefines the witch mother of fairy tale. Sutton sums up his review of *Zel* by affirming that “this is a book that transforms myth without flippancy, honoring the power of its roots” (Sutton, 603). In *The Magic Circle* and *Zel*, as in her other retellings of fairy tales, Napoli reworks the conventions of storytelling in traditional tales to create new and passionate stories that she makes relevant to young adult readers.

## NOTES

1. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981), 154.

2. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997).
3. Amie A. Doughty, *Folktales Retold: A Critical Overview of Stories Updated for Children* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006), 111. Hereafter referred to as Doughty.
4. Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 145. Hereafter referred to as Purkiss.
5. Quotes are from *The Magic Circle* paperback edition.
6. Betsy Hearne, review of *The Magic Circle*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 46, no. 8 (April 1993), 260. Hereafter referred to as Hearne.
7. Donna Jo Napoli, interview by author, March 14, 2008. Hereafter referred to as Napoli.
8. Donna Jo Napoli, *Something about the Author: Autobiography Series*, vol. 23 (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1997), 174.
9. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 50–51. Hereafter referred to as Tatar, 1987.
10. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. Reissued 1992), 236–237.
11. *Hansel and Gretel*, DVD, *Faerie Tale Theatre*, produced by Shelley Duvall (Scottsdale, Ariz.: Starmaker II LLC, 2004).
12. Virginia Walters, "Hansel and Gretel as Abandoned Children: Timeless Images for a Postmodern Age," *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 23, no. 4 (December 1992), 206.
13. Unsigned review of *The Magic Circle*, *Publisher's Weekly*, vol. 240, no. 24 (June 14, 1993), 73.
14. See, for example, unsigned review of *The Magic Circle*, *Kirkus Reviews*, vol. LXI, no. 12 (June 15, 1993), 789.
15. For a history of the tale with annotations, see Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (New York: Norton, 2004), 54–62. Hereafter referred to as Tatar, 2004.
16. For a detailed history of the Rapunzel tale with comparison of various versions, see Hilary S. Crew, "A Witch of a Mother: Rereading the Rapunzel Tale," *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, vol. 14, no. 3 (spring 2001), 45–51.
17. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1992), 46. Hereafter referred to as Grimm.
18. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 16–17.
19. Roger Sutton, *Zel*, *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. LXXII, no. 5 (September/October 1996), 603. Hereafter referred to as Sutton.

20. For example, the tower is silver in a French variant, Caumont de la Force's "Persinette." Paul Zelinsky's *Rapunzel* (Dutton, 1997) also features a more luxurious tower room.

21. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Goose Girl," *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1992), 322–327.

22. John Stephens, "Witch-Figures in Recent Children's Fiction: The Subaltern and the Subversive," *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*, ed. Anne Lawson Lucas (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 200.

23. See, for example, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Rapunzel: A Story by the Brothers Grimm*, illus. Felix Hoffmann, 1st American ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961).

24. Hazel Rochman, review of *Zel*, *Booklist*, vol. 93, no. 1 (September 1, 1996), 118.



## Chapter Three

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# The Lure of Gold: *Spinners* and *Crazy Jack*

CHANGING FOLKTALES INTO YOUNG ADULT NOVELS not only necessitates changing generic conventions such as narrative strategies, it also requires the substitution of stock characters such as “a miller’s daughter” or “a boy called Jack” for adolescent characters who readers expect to see grow and develop in some way. It involves positioning these characters in relational webs so that they are seen to interact with parents and/or other authority figures. Donna Jo Napoli, by integrating into her retellings issues central to adolescence, such as identity formation, sexuality, and independence, re-envisions folktales so that they are relevant to today’s teen readers. In *Spinners*, written by Napoli and Richard Tchen, and in Napoli’s *Crazy Jack*, protagonists are liberated from the stereotypes of folktale. The authors renegotiate the cultural scripts and values that are stitched so seamlessly into traditional versions of the tale of “Rumpelstiltskin” and “Jack and the Beanstalk.” In these retellings, relationships are central to story. The lure of gold, threaded thematically through the texts of both these young adult novels, is shown to disrupt and twist relationships. In *Spinners*, Napoli and Tchen fracture the associations among love, relationship, and male power based on wealth.

### SPINNING A RE-ENVISIONED RUMPELSTILTSKIN TALE

The story of “Rumpelstiltskin,” as it is entitled in the Opies’ *The Classic Fairy Tales*, is identified by the Opies as a tale that is familiar all over

Europe and as a tale in which the principal elements of the story have remained consistent over time.<sup>1</sup> The elements in the Grimms' version in their collection, against which Napoli and Tchen's version is compared, consist of a miller who boasts to a king that his daughter can spin straw into gold; the subsequent imprisonment of the daughter until she spins three rooms full of gold; the offer of help by a strange dwarf-like man, Rumpelstiltskin, in exchange for the child the daughter will bear when she becomes queen; and his offer to relinquish the bargain if the daughter guesses his name. Napoli and Tchen repeat elements from the heart of the tale but make some significant changes. These include an alternative strategy of telling the story; the development of Rumpelstiltskin into a complex character; and a plot in which Rumpelstiltskin's daughter, the young woman said to spin straw into gold, is at the center. The tale has been interpreted variously, but Napoli and Tchen create a text that challenges many of the values and ideologies embedded in the traditional tale. For example, the act of spinning is invested with meanings over and above its meaning as a productive task. The representation of Rumpelstiltskin's daughter incorporates characteristics and values congruent to those found in feminist texts.

In contrast to the anonymous narrator of "Rumpelstiltskin," Napoli and Tchen choose to spin their tale by telling two sides to the story: that of a tailor who falls in love and is rejected, and that of his daughter, Saskia. The parallel stories of the tailor and Saskia are narrated in different chapters by an anonymous narrator, although what is happening in the story is restricted to what the tailor and Saskia, respectively, think and feel and know about their situation and about other characters. Significant events in the tailor's and Saskia's lives are highlighted in the six parts into which the novel is divided: "Young Love," "Survival," "Yarn," "Gold," "Preparation," and "Naming."

### **A Tailor in Love**

Napoli and Tchen de-mystify the figure of Rumpelstiltskin referred to in the Grimm version as a "droll-looking little man" (Opie, 197) through his representation as a skilled and respected young tailor who has fallen in love with a young woman—a spinner. The association of gold with straw first appears in a sensuous scene at the beginning of the first chapter as the tailor "weaves" his hands through his lover's golden hair as they lie

together on the straw in a barn (*Spinners*, 4). Discursively strung together are the various values that are associated with the term *gold*. With a gold ring in hand, the tailor goes to ask the young woman's father for her hand in marriage. But her father tells the tailor that the young woman's other suitor, the miller, although much older, boasts that he will cover the young woman with gold. The tailor protests to her father that he loves his daughter and that he will "treat her good as gold" (*Spinners*, 9). He insists that she and he will form a good partnership as spinner and tailor, respectively. Napoli and Tchen retain the boasting and greed inherent in the traditional tale as the tailor also makes a boast in order to keep his lover. He will make his love a wedding dress made from gold. It is a boast that will cripple him.

In Napoli and Tchen's retelling, the magical act of spinning straw into gold is disassociated from the tailor himself and transferred to a spinning wheel, which he snatches from an elderly woman who does not wish to lend it to him. With the spinning wheel, he is able, once his tears of frustration have dampened the straw, to achieve what seemed impossible. He spins the straw into gold and weaves the gold thread into a wedding gown. But his leg, curled from the hours spent pedaling, cannot be straightened, despite being massaged by his lover. The young woman's father will not accept a cripple as a husband for his daughter. There is no help for the tailor from the woman from whom he took the belatedly returned spinning wheel, and the young woman, now wife to the miller and with child, rejects him. When he goes to visit her prior to her giving birth to the child that he knows is his, he presents her with the ring and confronts her with his love and fatherhood. She tells him that his "soul is as rumpled" as his "body," and "she names him, a new name, a name of revulsion" (*Spinners*, 31). The importance of names and naming in the traditional tale is retained and made more significant in *Spinners* as the tailor, whose family name is not given in the text, is aware of his loss of identity and what it means. "Maybe he has no real name anymore. Just the ugly made-up name that the young woman spat at him on the morning of her death" (*Spinners*, 58). "A name is a person," he wants to tell those who refer to him only as "the spinner" (*Spinners*, 87). The obsession that motivates his actions, now and in the future, is visible as he waits to claim the young woman's baby as his own. His hand runs with blood from "digging his finger into his forehead, digging to the rhythm of his hopes" (*Spinners*, 32). His daughter, Saskia, is born, but the young woman dies.

### Becoming Rumpelstiltskin

Set in process is the outer and inner journey of a tailor, who becomes an itinerant spinner, and is described in “Survival” as growing increasingly crippled in body and mind as he struggles to earn a living. In talking about her collaboration with Tchen in writing *Spinners*, Napoli explains that, although she often wrote about characters with disabilities, she had never “drawn a causative line” between a character’s physical disability and spirit. She, thus, found the concept that a character’s “withered” spirit would be the cause of the physical withering of his leg a difficult one. Tchen, a Buddhist, on the other hand, found the concept congruent with a philosophy of reincarnation in which “physical imperfections” were the result of “spiritual misdeeds.” They finally made the decision to make the association between the withering of the tailor’s crippled spirit and leg because it fits so well with the tale and characters.<sup>2</sup> Physical deformity, however, is often associated with spinning.<sup>3</sup> In *Spinners*, the labor and deformity usually associated with women and spinning are displaced onto a male who carries his spinning wheel on his back, while Saskia, the tailor’s daughter, represented as equally skilled at spinning, retains her beauty.

Tatar argues that the figure of Rumpelstiltskin has always elicited “a good measure of sympathy from readers” (Tatar, 1987, 127). Napoli and Tchen have built on the potential of this empathetic reading by using a narrative strategy that enables readers to view events from his perspective and by representing him as a tragic character. His story is one of rejection. He shows that he craves what he has lost—namely, his lover and a family. He may be “distorted,” but he is represented as retaining the capacity for love. From the time when the tailor labors to make his love her golden wedding dress, the labor of spinning is invested with a meaning over and above economic gain; it is also a labor of love and of passion. When the tailor hears of the talented girl, Saskia, who sells her own skeins in the market, and learns who she is, he declares his love for her and sleeps on a pillow in which her yarns are enmeshed with his own. He dreams of their meeting so that they may share the secrets of spinning. He imagines her joyful acceptance of him as her father. His lost love’s spinning wheel becomes an object of exchange as the wheel used to spin gold from straw is exchanged for the wheel that is now his daughter’s, so that he will “feel” his “beloved’s hands every time” he touches the wheel (*Spinners*, 90). This obsession with a lover and a daughter who are lost to him deepens into the

twisted obsession for his daughter's child and would seem to provide the motivation for his actions that some reviewers see as lacking.<sup>4</sup> The tragic consequences of the tailor's decisions are emphasized by the possible alternative path for the spinner's life that he refuses to take. He is admired by Elke, a servant of the king, who, seeing his yarns in the marketplace, secures work for him from the king and takes him to a hut where he can work in peace. Elke views him with affection, but he spurns her advances while persisting in his plans to obtain what he thinks is his by right. Some of the most poignant passages are those in which the spinner is described at making a home from his hut, whittling small toys, and strengthening his body so that he may become fit to take care of a grandchild.

Just as he was rejected as a husband, the spinner is rejected by his daughter, who is, the spinner rejoices, "flesh of his flesh" (*Spinners*, 131). She looks at him with "revulsion" when she thinks he will take her up on the offer of her body in a final payment for spinning gold into straw—an offer which sickens him. In imagining Rumpelstiltskin as the biological father of the girl whom he helps, there is a level of intensity and emotion absent from the version in the Opies' collection. A father understands his daughter's suggestion as an incestuous bargain. Love turns to hate. "She is her mother's daughter; she sees only with her eyes" (*Spinners*, 132).

The Opies comment that the tale "Rumpel-stilts-Kin" depends upon the "interdependence of name and identity" and that its appeal is in the tricking of a "supernatural creature" by "human cleverness" (Opie, 195). There is a hint of farce in the downfall of Rumpel-stilts-Kin in the version in the Opies' collection. When the miller's daughter gives the dwarf his name, he is filled with rage, plunges his leg and foot through the floor, pulls them out with his hands, and leaves with everyone laughing at his foolishness. In contrast, Napoli and Tchen construct an unbridgeable chasm between a daughter and a biological father by providing a harrowing ending for the spinner. His daughter weeps as he hops away, "a river of blood flowing from his groin" (*Spinners*, 196). His "rumpled leg" still pumps in the hole where he had plunged it (*Spinners*, 197).

### **Saskia: Spinner as Artist**

Saskia is imagined as being a freer agent than the miller's daughter in the Grimm version of the traditional tale. Another of Napoli's vibrant, active,

and intelligent girl protagonists, she also proves to be hard-working and resourceful when the miller becomes incapacitated. Saskia is responsible for their survival and persuades her best friend's mother to teach her to spin. They enter into an agreement whereby Saskia receives a percentage of the money her own skeins bring in from the market stall they share. Napoli and Tchen subvert the Grimms' "anti-work" version of Rumpelstiltskin that tells of a young woman's rise to queenhood "through her alleged accomplishments as a spinner," even though she "manages to avoid sitting down at a spinning wheel" (Tatar, 1987, 123). Saskia proves to be skilled at spinning and has a head for business. But her labor is also associated with creativity and innovation. Saskia learns quickly to improve on the techniques taught to her. She soaks sheep's wool only in "cold rainwater" so that it retains "its lanolin," thus making for a softer product (*Spinners*, 73). She spends extra time teasing and carding the wool for a finer wool, knowing that she is driven to do more than earn the money she needs by selling her yarns. She knows that she spins the "best yarn she's ever seen" at the market for she "has the power to make beauty. Spinning gives her that power" (*Spinners*, 74).

Saskia, as artist, uses different wools and fibers to spin unusual and beautiful, yet serviceable, yarns on the wheel that the spinner asked the miller to give her in exchange for her mother's spinning wheel—the wheel that had once spun straw into gold. There is a magical quality to her artistry. She gathers "autumn-dry grasses" to spin with wool (*Spinners*, 94). She spins yarn from cotton and "the stamen and pistils and veins" of wild violets (*Spinners*, 96). She experiments with the stalks of rye, which she finds are better spun with flax. A language that conveys the color, feel, and perfume of her yarns is integrated with Saskia's good marketing sense: "The raw linen alone would be pale honey-colored, but with rye added to it, it yields a warm brown. It will sell well" (*Spinners*, 95). She "rolls fruit fiber in spiderweb" (*Spinners* 95), and the joy she feels in her work spills over: "This mix spins with flax easily. The linen comes with colored soft bumps. It is playful and dancy and makes her laugh" (*Spinners*, 96).

The money from Saskia's labor is to be used to buy back her former spinning wheel, "to right the terrible wrong of giving up Mother's wheel" (*Spinners*, 95). Spinning, for Saskia, is also invested with love, love for her mother and a passion for connection with her. It brings her, most importantly, a sense of empowerment.

### Spinning a Mother-Daughter Connection

As in *Zel* and *The Magic Circle*, the mother-daughter connection is a significant element of the story. In *Spinners*, congruent with feminist revisions of female adolescence, value is placed on a mother's relationship with a daughter. The recovery of memories of a mother through symbolic objects is seen as a positive rather than a regressive force in a daughter's life. Saskia's mother's spinning wheel is used, literally and metaphorically, to create a connection between a mother and daughter. Saskia finds a small hollow at the bottom of the threading hook. As she holds the hook, she places her thumb in the indentation thinking that someone must have done that before her. When the miller takes the spinning wheel away from her, she itches to feel the indentation and fingers the treasured ring and necklace that once belonged to her mother. The links between the tailor, her mother, and Saskia appear throughout the text. Saskia, approaching her fifteenth birthday, wonders whether her mother had made her shell necklace, or, perhaps, a young man had given it to her. Her mother becomes a palpable presence between the spinner and Saskia, not only in the exchange of the necklace and the ring for the spinner's labor in spinning straw into gold, but also in the sensual and erotic passages that reproduce the sensuousness of the scenes between Saskia's mother and the tailor at the beginning of the novel. He gazes at her woman's body as she presents herself to him as her mother had done before him. "Beneath the shift, he senses the outline of firm thighs. The air holds the scent of woman" (*Spinners*, 131). "This is all I have left to give," she tells him. "Please. Accept the exchange" (*Spinners*, 137).

A figurative language of the maternal evokes connections between mother and child. Saskia is told by an elderly woman at the market that her yarn is "soft like a mother's breast." Saskia surmises that the woman's mother had died long ago. "And her own breasts probably hang empty against her ribs" (*Spinners*, 75). The wheel that belonged to the spinner spun "as smooth as warm milk" (*Spinners*, 93). The mother-daughter connection is intimately caught up in the circulation of terms: straw, gold, spinning, love, labor, and child. Her mother had been "good at names," the spinner tells Saskia (*Spinners*, 182). When she names the spinner with the name given to him by her mother, and he tears his leg from his body, Saskia, suspecting that she is, indeed, his daughter, falls to her knees. "Blood and tears and milk merge" (*Spinners*, 197).

### Gender and Power

In *Spinners*, there are negotiations of power between Saskia and the men in her life. In an episode that recalls the shaving of the head of Samson by Delilah, the young Saskia and her best friend, Dagmar, shave the head and beard of the drunken and boasting miller while he is sleeping. The miller is, in effect, emasculated. He takes to his bed, refuses to work, and drinks day and night. Saskia takes control of the household until she throws away her father's gin, after which he regains his strength. However, the retention of the episode in the traditional tale in which a daughter is surrendered to the mercy of a king through a miller's idle boasting acts as a restraint on Saskia's struggle for independence. Saskia, temporarily, loses her newfound power over the miller as she is delivered, with her spinning wheel, to the palace where he engages in a boasting match with the king over Saskia's spinning abilities. Helpless before the power of a king, Saskia is also made dependent on her unknown biological father in order to perform the task that will save her life. But Saskia regains power over both her fathers. She sends the miller away and ignores him until she sends for him to help find out more about the spinner. She is directly involved in the downfall of the spinner. By the end of the novel, she is bound by neither.

*Spinners* retains the traditional version's plotting whereby a commoner girl is won by a king, but there is little romance. Saskia's relationship with the king is forged, when they first meet, through money, greed, and power. The king is represented as a young man, possessing an inflated ego, who will not be out-boasted by the miller. Saskia must die should she fail to uphold the miller's boast, for "trying to make a fool" of him (*Spinners*, 110). He displays the greed for gold that is exhibited in the traditional tale. His offer of marriage conveys his appreciation of her qualities that are associated with the traditional tale—namely, a beautiful young girl who can perform "miracles," and who is "a commoner by birth but not by form and spirit" (*Spinners*, 128). He shows the imperiousness of a king exercising his right as he tells Saskia that he wants her and will have her.

Napoli and Tchen, thus, retain the heterosexual marriage contract and Saskia's accepted role as queen and mother that are congruent both with the traditional story and with the socioeconomic context of the novel's setting. Any control that Saskia has over her life depends on her ability to change power relationships within the marriage. This is achieved through key changes made from the traditional tale. She defies the king on the third morning she is asked to spin gold. She tells him that his greed is

unnatural. The following morning she refuses his demand that he marry her, for she “will not marry a man who would kill [her] for failing to spin straw into gold, and who would make [her his] queen for succeeding” (*Spinners*, 139). When Saskia is escorted back to the palace, which she had insisted on leaving after refusing the king’s proposal, she knows that there is nowhere else for her to go, for everyone she knows, including the miller, expects her to spin straw into gold—a fact that the king knows full well. “Few tales,” notes Tatar, “are so crass as ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ in depicting purely economic motives for marriage” (Tatar, 124). The changing of the power relationship between Saskia and the king depends, therefore, on destroying the association between her spinning and wealth. In a dramatic scene in which it seems that Saskia herself will be thrown in the fire, the king burns the magic spinning wheel so that she is never again able to perform the task that the king believes she is capable of doing—spinning straw into gold. Gold as an exchange for marriage—an exchange that had set the tailor on the road to destruction—is finally rejected.

Once married, Saskia works to take control of their relationship. In a scene that invokes the shaving of the miller, Saskia shaves the hair and beard of her husband, who submits, trustingly, to her use of the razor. She begins to determine her own future within the castle. She requests a tutor so that she can learn to read and write. She had been successful at running a business as a spinner, she tells her husband. Now, she wishes to help manage the business of the castle. Saskia, thus, insists upon being given access to knowledge and power, and to the “wisdom” acquired by reading that her husband thinks reserved for men (*Spinners*, 152). She demonstrates, as she has done before, that she can disarm the king through her arguments. She will have the time, she tells him, even with raising children, to participate in running the castle because, as a woman, she can attend to those things he finds too time-consuming. The importance of young women’s access to power through knowledge is a theme running through many of Napoli’s novels. Saskia also attempts to prevent an unwanted pregnancy so as to avoid her promise to the spinner, but not everything is within her control. Napoli and Tchen show the limits to which a resourceful and creative young woman can go in controlling events and her life—given her circumstances.

In retaining the socioeconomic settings of the traditional tales of “Rumpelstiltskin” and “Jack and the Beanstalk,” Napoli and Tchen reinforce the centrality of work to youthful protagonists both in *Spinners* and

in *Crazy Jack*. But in so doing, they renegotiate the values associated with work and gold encoded into traditional versions. In both *Spinners* and *Crazy Jack*, Napoli fractures the association between marriage and wealth.

### *CRAZY JACK*

Napoli's retelling of "Jack and the Beanstalk" is discussed in relation to the version included in Iona and Peter Opies' *The Classic Fairy Tales: The History of Jack and the Bean-Stalk, Printed From the Original Manuscript, Never Before Published*, 1807 (Opie, 163). As befitting a folktale in which the well-known refrain "Fee Fi Fo Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman" is reiterated in the text, Napoli follows the traditional version by setting her tale in England, but setting it, specifically, in North Central England. Details of the novel's setting are congruent with rural life in the 1500s. Napoli works with the basic elements of the tale—the disappearance of a father, a son's selling of a cow for a handful of beans, and a magical beanstalk at the top of which dwells a giant and his wife—to create a taut, sophisticated novel that is both symbolically and psychologically rich.

Bettelheim interprets the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk as a Freudian description of male development in which the boy, Jack, in the throes of puberty, has faith that the magical beans/seeds he exchanges for the cow will be fruitful. In climbing the beanstalk (a phallic symbol), he demonstrates his strength, his courage, and a willingness to engage in risk by meeting and defeating the giant, the "oedipal father."<sup>5</sup> Integral to this Freudian interpretation of the traditional tale is a negative assessment of Jack's mother, who is perceived by Bettelheim to have failed her son in scolding him for his foolishness in trading their cow for beans. She "is revealed as the foolish one because she failed to recognize the development from child to adolescent which was taking place in her son" (Bettelheim, 192). Jack matures despite her "low opinion" of him. The tale, for Bettelheim, is one that shows up the "error" of parents who do not sensitively respond "to the various problems involved in a child's maturing personally, socially, and sexually" (Bettelheim, 193). Napoli changes the tale by placing Jack into the context of his father and mother's relationship, by portraying a mother who is anything but negative and foolish, and by creating the character of Flora, a childhood friend with whom Jack is in love. The representation of Jack bends traditional scripts of masculinity,

and his relationship with his father is represented as a loving one. Napoli replaces an anonymous narrator of the traditional tale with the first-person narration of her protagonist, Jack. The novel begins with Jack's description of working in the fields with his father.

### A Family

A key change from traditional versions of "Jack and the Beanstalk" is the living presence, rather than the absence, of Jack's father at the beginning of the tale. In the version reprinted in *Opies*, it is explained to Jack by a "fairy" guardian that his wealthy father had been murdered by the giant when Jack was small. The giant had burned down Jack's home and plundered Jack's family's wealth, leaving Jack and his mother indigent (Opie, 168). In Napoli's retelling, there is a loving relationship between the father and Jack, who is nine years old at the beginning of the novel. Although the relationship is seen through Jack's narration, his admiration for his father is clearly reciprocated as his father tells him that he is his "partner" and praises him for his hard work in sowing the wheat (*Crazy*, 3). This closeness is expressed by Jack as he tells how his father had taught him how to make a "funnel" with his hands: "I was only four and his hands were huge around mine" (*Crazy*, 2).

Jack's relationship with his father in *Crazy Jack* is positioned within the context of Jack's parents' marriage. From Jack's perspective, there is an easy-going relationship among the three of them, until the harvest fails because of drought. His father uses the refrain "food on the table and a roof over our heads" and "each other" to assure Jack this is all their family needs, but it does not prove enough (*Crazy*, 2). His father, although characterized as a hardworking farmer, is also portrayed as a risk-taker, as he uses his strength as a wrestler to make wagers, particularly during times when work is scarce. One fateful day, he wagers his fields for a flock of sheep and loses. The breakdown of family harmony is reported by Jack as his mother and father begin to quarrel. Heard through Jack's narration is the tension and fear of a young boy as he listens to his parents' raised voices and his relief when the fighting stops and the warm family circle is restored. His father, however, after more family quarrels over the keeping and losing of a rooster and hen, is finally driven, literally, over a cliff to rescue the family from worsening poverty. Jack's first-person narrative gives voice to his stress and fear as he runs screaming after his father, shouting

that he did not want the gold at the end of the rainbow that he thinks his father is going to find, that he just wants him. Unable to keep up, the last Jack sees of his father is his figure disappearing over the top of the cliff where he seemingly walks into “white air” (*Crazy*, 41).

### **A Lost Father**

The next chapter, “Seven Years Later,” begins with Jack’s nightmare at sixteen in which he chases after his father and smashes himself against the cliff over which his father had disappeared. It is through listening to the dialogue between Jack and his mother, and with Flora, rather than through Jack’s first-person narration, that the reader learns about the trauma and craziness the young boy experienced and continues to experience as a young man, over the loss of a loved father. On the anniversary of his father’s disappearance, Jack hurls himself again and again at the cliff over which his father climbed until he has bloodied his hands and head. But Jack is consumed with guilt for not following his father. He feels that he was responsible for driving his father away because of his boast that he would save the family by going after the pot of gold that lay at the end of the rainbow. Yet, he also acknowledges his father’s foolishness. “What kind of fool takes his son’s childish words and shapes them into a knife to pierce his own heart?” (*Crazy*, 47). His father, Jack thinks, had forgotten the most important thing—that they needed each other.

Jack’s father may have literally disappeared, but he continues to be discursively present in the story and psychically present in Jack’s head. He identifies with his father’s risk-taking when he climbs to the giant’s castle and retrieves those things that help his mother and him to survive. He feels that his father’s spirit is with him as he plants the beans that are produced by the beanstalk. He loved his father, he tells the giant’s mistress as he weeps for him. In Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis, the giant—a “destructive and devouring ogre”—stands for the perceived view of the oedipal father from which a boy must free himself (Bettelheim, 192). Trues points out that rebellion or the symbolic “murder” of a parent is a major convention found in adolescent novels.<sup>6</sup> If one reads through a psychoanalytic lens, Jack can be said to destroy the symbolic power of the father in the form of the phantasmal giant who had eaten his own father. But Napoli allows for a more open interpretation. When the giant’s body shrinks to the size of a normal man as it falls from the beanstalk, Jack comments

that it could “have been the body of any man, any poor enchanted soul finally freed from a hideous spell” (*Crazy*, 128–129). However, only when he buries the body of the giant is he able to say good-bye to the father who had haunted him for seven years. He tells Flora that he has put away the past when he buries the beanstalk and that he will not return to the cliff. The nightmares are over, and so is his craziness.

### A Valued Mother

In opposition to Bettelheim’s Freudian interpretation of the mother in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” Napoli constructs a positive portrayal of her. She is perceived by Jack as being a sensible decision-maker. She is associated with the values of hard work and foresight. After her husband’s disappearance, she and Jack work the fields that now belong to a neighboring farmer. She is represented as supporting Jack, comforting him during his nightmares and praising him for his being a good worker. She acknowledges that he is “clever” when he is not crazed (*Crazy*, 62). Her anger and despair over his trade are put in the context of despair over their predicament and over Jack’s intermittent crazy behavior. His mother is frightened, Jack acknowledges, so she is not able to see the rightness of his bargain. Their relationship is one that echoes the warm, hardworking partnership that Jack had shared with his father.

### A “Crazy” Jack

In the version of “Jack and the Beanstalk” collected by the Opies, Jack is said to be “indolent, careless, and extravagant” (Opie, 164). Jack, at the beginning of the novel, presents himself not only as a hardworking lad but also as a lighthearted boy who dances, sings, and tells jokes. Napoli constructs a nuanced representation of a maturing youth. Described by his parents and others as physically strong, he proves his independence, initiative, and courage, as well as his strength and agility, in climbing the beanstalk and killing the giant. But he is also portrayed through his thoughts and emotions as a highly sensitive, loving boy who openly displays his affection for his parents and for Flora. Although he is a farmer to the core, he is also shown to be artistic and creative as he builds the house that will be Flora’s.

He is identified as “crazy,” “mad,” and an “outsider.” Flora tells him, for example, that she, already perceived as a foreigner because of her

Spanish father, cannot marry a “madman” because of her children’s future (*Crazy*, 108). His playful use of language is viewed as a sign of disorder and craziness. Jack makes derogatory remarks and jokes in order to make Flora’s suitor, William, uncomfortable and to gain a sense of power. He defies all societal proprieties by making animal noises, mooing and neighing, when William, wishing to show charity toward Jack, offers him employment and speaks, Jack perceives, as if he were a “master” hiring a “beast” (*Crazy*, 86).

Napoli emphasizes the concept of play, which is associated not only with Jack’s craziness but also with the creative play of language and the enjoyment of shared fun. She “used to know how to play,” he tells Flora when she turns her back on his mooing (*Crazy*, 59). Play and work and pleasure are interconnected in Napoli’s text—concepts that spill over rigid demarcations and intermingle as a positive way of approaching one’s life.

### Real and Imaginary

Napoli builds into her text the liminal space between what is real and what is imaginary. She places the unstable boundary between reality and fantasy in the context of superstitious belief in fourteenth-century rural England. As a reviewer of *Crazy Jack* puts it, “The earthbound lives of the English laborer whose fortunes are tied to the forces of nature mix naturally with a concurrent belief in the spirit world and superstition.”<sup>7</sup> Daily events happen through luck and ill luck. The folk belief in the pot of gold that lies at the end of the rainbow is stitched into the story as Jack, after seeing a rainbow, tells his father that perhaps he would go and get the pot for the family. Jack shows himself to be especially predisposed to belief in fairies and the giant. He realizes, however, that he is positioned in a place between reality and imagination when he asks himself whether the “fairy man” who had given him the beans that glowed in colors of the rainbow was real. “Nothing’s real. I’m sitting by the side of the road with an imaginary stranger talking to my thoughts . . .” (*Crazy*, 54). There is an indeterminacy in the scene in which Jack describes the stranger dressed in his father’s clothes and speaking words that his father had used, because the episode is only seen and reported on by Jack. The restricted focus of Jack’s first-person narration also works well in a tale in which only Jack visits, sees, and meets the inhabitants of the castle at the top of the beanstalk.

The beanstalk connects the reality of Jack's world with the world of fantasy that lies over the cliff. Napoli emphasizes the phantasmal nature of the scenes of the castle. On his third visit, Jack realizes that the castle, the inhabitants, and the world over the cliff are "colorless." He thinks it may be "a trick of the eyes" (*Crazy*, 116). The explanation for a black, white, and gray world is rooted in another fairy tale, the result of a curse placed on the giant by the fairy queen for stealing fairy treasures. The magic of the castle and the beanstalk dissipates on solid earth. The beans gathered from the beanstalk are of normal size, the golden eggs become ordinary brown eggs, and the pot of gold becomes a pot of stones. Jack must learn to play the self-playing lyre. The only magical quality that remains is the inexhaustible source of eggs, beans, and stones. But Jack and his mother's comfortable living is due as much to their hard work and resourcefulness as to any magic—values that are endorsed in the text. It is in the fantasy world of the castle, however, that Jack is exposed to a new awareness of desire and seduction.

### **Desire, Seduction, Love**

"Sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature" (Trites, 84). In retelling "Jack and the Beanstalk" as a young adult novel, Napoli places emphasis on Jack's sexual awareness and sexuality, not only through the use of the beanstalk, which is open to interpretation as a phallic symbol, but also through his relationship with Flora, a childhood friend, and through his encounters with the giant's mistress. Three phases of Jack's sexual development can be identified in the narrative: Jack's relationship with Flora when they were children; Jack's exposure to temptation and carnal lust in scenes in the giant's castle; and the sexual relationship that a more mature Jack wishes to share with Flora. Right from the beginning of the novel, Jack and Flora are portrayed as close friends eager to be in each other's company whenever possible. There is a warm, easy relationship between them as they ride in the wagon to market, Flora's head on Jack's chest. They had "kissed behind the woodpile" (*Crazy*, 65) and had already pledged to marry. As in other novels, Napoli emphasizes the sensuality of sexual desire when writing about sexual and/or romantic relationships. Jack employs a language rich in sensory detail as he describes his feelings for Flora: "I smell the grains in her skirt, the plum juice on her tongue. I want to taste those plums on

her lips" (*Crazy*, 58). His desire is made evident as he gathers "her skirts together in a ball between [his] hands exposing her calves and the lower parts of her hard thighs" (*Crazy*, 59), and as he swings her in the air. He reels from "the touch of her skin" (*Crazy*, 65) and smells her "sweetness" (*Crazy*, 102).

The desire and love that Jack feels for Flora are contrasted with scenes of carnal desire and seduction in the giant's castle. On his first visit, the giant's mistress calls to him with an "eager" voice and leans seductively against the door. She has "darkened" lips (*Crazy Jack*, 69) and is knowledgeable, Jack knows, in ways that Flora is not. The wholesomeness of fresh eggs, homemade muffins, and cheeses are associated with childhood and Flora, whereas, in the castle, the piles of food that await Jack are explicitly associated with an unwholesome sexual appetite and desire. Jack describes them in terms of sensory delights—for example, the "sweet spice" and "aromatic bacon"—but he also notes the obscenity of the displays of food (*Crazy*, 70). Food is unequivocally equated with desire as Jack's eyes "climb" to the breasts of the giant's mistress, which lie beneath her clothing but are "close, so close" (*Crazy*, 71). On his second visit, he imagines her seductive pose as he climbs up the beanstalk with flushed cheeks and panting breath. In a classic scene of seduction, the temptress, in dishabille with "brazen eyes," feeds him berries, one by one (*Crazy*, 92). The giant affords Jack a vision of uncontrolled, carnivorous appetite and desire that culminates in a scene in which Jack hears moaning, but does not see the giant satisfying his carnal lust for "fresh flesh" (*Crazy*, 96).

In keeping with traditional versions, the giant's woman also protects Jack by hiding him from the giant. Through a Freudian lens, the oedipal mother whom a boy desires and who protects him from his oedipal father may be seen as writ large in the fantasy realm of the castle. But Napoli adds twists that invite readers to think about other ways of seeing an old tale. Jack also takes on the roles of rescuer and protector. The giant's mistress is represented as an abused woman. Jack sees her bruises and listens as she tells him that she had been lured away from her robber husband by the giant's wealth and is now trapped. In tempting Jack, she had hoped to persuade him to rescue her from the castle, as his father had attempted to do before him. The twisted relationship between giant and mistress can be read as a grotesque parody of marital relations particularly when compared to the relationship between Jack's parents. It influences how Jack thinks

about Flora's upcoming marriage to William. Both Flora and the giant's mistress "cry" in his "head" (*Crazy*, 103).

Flora is represented as being wary of the young man with whom she has grown up so closely. She keeps him at arm's length but is unable to stay away from him. Jack's sexual desire for Flora is made plain as he thinks of William and Flora in bed together and swings her high in the air. Emphasis is placed, as in other of Napoli's novels, on the centrality of relationship and the pleasure of desire. Jack shows Flora that he knows her every desire, her needs, what brings her joy. He builds a house with a courtyard that he plans to give her for her wedding with William. Flora listens to him as he plays on the lyre on the eve of her wedding. He plays, "her feet, the way her toes curl now in the sunshine" (*Crazy*, 132). He woos and wins her with words about "pleasure"—a value emphasized in the text. She brings him the box in which she kept the feathers he had given her over the years, including the feather he had given her when he told her that there was more to life than marrying the stolid, sensible William. Jack comments that the bigger house that the more prosperous William has built for Flora is for "Flora the work-horse. Flora the cook" (*Crazy*, 85). Through Jack's wooing of Flora and her responses, Napoli presents to her readers the foundation upon which good relationships are built. Jack repeats the refrain "to have food on the table and a roof over our heads, but most of all, to have each other" as he holds Flora in his arms (*Crazy*, 134). In choosing Jack, Flora places value on love and a playful creativeness rather than on material wealth. Saskia's relationship with the king in *Spinners* and Jack's relationship with Flora in *Crazy Jack* stand in counterpoint to the twisted relationships constructed in each of the novels that are based on boasts, obsessions, bargains, and the lure of gold.

## NOTES

1. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. Reissued 1992), 195. Hereafter referred to as Opie.
2. Donna Jo Napoli, interview by DownHomeBooks, September 2003, <http://downhomebooks.com/napoli.htm> (accessed 5/19/2008).
3. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 118. Hereafter referred to as Tatar.

4. See, for example, Ruth S. Vose, review of *Spinners*, *School Library Journal*, vol. 45, no. 9 (September 1999), 228; unsigned review of *Spinners*, *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 246, no. 29 (July 19, 1999), 196.

5. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 190. Hereafter referred to as Bettelheim.

6. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2000), 57. Hereafter referred to as Trites.

7. Lauren Adams, review of *Crazy Jack*, *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 76, no. 1 (January/February 2000), 80–81.

## Chapter Four

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# Transformations: *Bound and Beast*

IN HER RETELLING OF THE CINDERELLA TALE IN *BOUND*, Napoli goes back to its Chinese origins and sets her novel in a southern province of China during the Ming dynasty. Napoli's retelling of the Beauty and the Beast tale, drawn from Charles Lamb's poetic version, is set first in Iran and then in France. Napoli integrates into her retellings how belief systems and ideologies of gender influence her protagonists' lives and perceptions in specific cultures. In revising the romantic plots in these two fairy tales, Napoli portrays that young women can make their own choices. She changes the way in which the relationships of fairy tale heroines and their princes have been presented in these tales in regard to issues of gender and power. In both novels, the fantasy motif of transformation doubles as a metaphor for the maturation of youthful protagonists.

### *BOUND*

In a postscript, Napoli states that her Cinderella story is "faithful" to the various Chinese versions that she has read, but she changes the story by setting it in the time of the Ming dynasty "rather than in Qin and Han times" (*Bound*, 185). *Bound* is also set in a "northern rather than a southern province" and in an "ordinary community rather than a minority community." This enabled her, Napoli explains, to bring into her story "cultural habits of time, place, and community" such as foot binding and the "social revolution" of the "first Ming emperor" (*Bound*, 186). Napoli

also brings into her text references to Chinese philosophies such as the Confucian teachings and rituals regarding ancestor worship, Daoism, and reincarnation. Her version is similar in some of its elements to Tuan Ch'eng-shih's version in "Yu-yang tsa-tsu hsü-chi" from the T'ang dynasty (618–907 A.D.), which is one of the earliest recorded written versions.<sup>1</sup> This is also the basis for a picture book version: *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*, retold by Ai-Ling Louie, with which some teens may be familiar.<sup>2</sup> Elements found in the T'ang version that are found in Napoli's retelling include the "red carp that often grows rapidly into a dragon in Chinese folklore" and a "gold" or "golden" shoe that "was as light as a hair and made no noise when walking on stone" (Ting, 10). In the T'ang version, as related by R. D. Jameson, the young woman, Sheh Hsien, receives the gift of "bluish finery" by recovering the bones of the fish she had caught and befriended and that her stepmother had killed.<sup>3</sup> In *Bound*, as in *Spinners*, Napoli employs an anonymous narrator. The story is focused, however, through Napoli's Cinderella character, Xing Xing, so that it is her perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are presented in the text. Xing Xing's mother had died when she was seven years old, and her father, Master Wu, a potter, had died when she was thirteen. She lives with her father's second wife, Stepmother, and Wei Pei, her half-sister (who is one year older than Xing Xing), in the cave that had belonged to Master Wu. Their only source of income comes from selling his remaining pots. At the beginning of the novel, Xing Xing observes the binding of Wei Pei's feet.

### The Cultural Binding of Young Women

Wei Pei's mother is described as partaking in a tradition in which a mother with bound feet binds, in turn, the feet of her daughter. Like other women in their community, she associates foot binding with a girl's chances of marriage. For Wei Pei, a painful process is made more difficult because she has reached puberty before the binding process, whereas girls were often bound before they were six years old. The ideal feet would "be small enough to fit in a man's hand like a golden lotus blossom" (*Bound*, 7). Heard in Napoli's story are arguments against the tradition of foot binding, such as the pain, the physical limitations it imposed on women, and the fact that the mutilation of a woman's body was regarded as a sign of sexual attraction. For example, there are descriptions of Wei Pei's blood-stained bandages and the "foul-smelling yellow liquid that seemed to drain away

her energy” as she lies, unable to walk, on the family *kang* (*Bound*, 11). Stepmother and Wei Pei hobble around their cave, and Xing Xing makes the observation that women with bound feet did not walk “gracefully, no matter how sexy that irregular swing of the hips was thought to look” (*Bound*, 154). An incident in which a raccoon kit, kept as a pet, bites off the toes of one of Wei Pei’s feet reinforces the association of foot binding with disfigurement. The complicity of a mother in a tortuous process is reinforced as Wei Pei’s mother cuts off the toes of Wei Pei’s other foot so that her feet will be even. They must take advantage of the situation, she tells Xing Xing and Wei Pei. Wei Pei’s feet will now be smaller than they had hoped. Wei Pei, however, nearly dies from this mutilation.

Napoli sets her story in a cultural context in which daughters are devalued in relation to sons. Xing Xing reports that in both rural areas and cities, baby girls were often discarded and eaten by animals. Wei Pei’s mother had had little regard for her daughter, not even addressing her by her given name until Xing Xing’s mother died. Only then did she draw closer to Wei Pei. One of her sayings was “better one deformed son than many daughters wise as Buddha” (*Bound*, 27). Xing Xing, however, had been valued by her parents. Her name means “stars,” and her mother had referred to her as her “Sparkling One” (*Bound*, 25). Her father had been proud of his clever daughter. In accordance with Chinese beliefs and traditions, Xing Xing honors her parents’ memory and visits her father’s grave frequently.

### **An Enlightened Father and an Educated Daughter**

In *Bound*, as in other novels, Napoli emphasizes the importance of education for girls. Xing Xing’s enlightened father was determined to free his daughters from some of the social and cultural barriers that constrained them. He had, when alive, forbidden the practice of foot binding. It had not been a prevalent custom further south where he had grown up, and he argued that his daughters could not help him in his work as a potter if they were not able to walk properly. Wu had also served as a gateway into a wider world for Wei Pei and Xing Xing by taking them to the next village.

Education was unheard of for most people in the area where Xing Xing’s family lived until Master Wu moved there. The local boys were not educated, let alone the girls. The cultural bias against women’s education is heard by Xing Xing when a state official professes that Kong Fu Zi

teaches “that lack of talent in a woman is a virtue” (*Bound*, 101). But Wu had insisted that his daughters receive education in the area of the “three perfections,” calligraphy, painting, and poetry, and had taught them calligraphy himself (*Bound*, 13). Although there is no question of Xing Xing’s being able to keep up her formal education, she continues to practice calligraphy by her father’s grave at the point where she thinks his stomach and, therefore, his wisdom lies. Xing Xing constantly draws on her father’s wisdom and guidance. She takes opportunities to use her skills, as when she copies the words of a poem composed by Mei Zi, the wife of Master Tang, on to one of Master’s Tang’s paintings. Xing Xing demonstrates that she too, is creative when she composes her own poems, including the Chi poem for the cave festival.

The difference that an education makes is made clear through the contrasting of Xing Xing’s intellect, rich imagination, and independence of spirit with the passivity of Wei Ping, who had had no interest in her lessons. With no mind of her own, Wei Ping is complicit in her subjection to her mother’s binding of her feet and to her mother’s plans. She depends on Xing Xing to provide diversions from her pain. But, as Xing Xing is aware, education for girls is not without its disadvantages. Xing Xing thinks how she has no friends her age because they distrust her; and she suspects that education will be a disadvantage in looking for a husband now that her father is dead. She knows she is vulnerable to being sold as a slave by Stepmother if a husband is not found for Wei Pei.

### Stepmother

Three mother-daughter relationships are embedded in *Bound*: Wei Pei’s relationship with her mother, Stepmother’s relationship with Xing Xing, and Xing Xing’s relationship with her spirit mother. The relationship in which a jealous stepmother mistreats a stepdaughter, found in Westernized versions of the tale, takes on new dimensions in a tale in which Napoli incorporates and expands upon story elements from Chinese variants. The belief in the link between the spirits of the dead and the living underlies the jealous actions and behavior of Stepmother toward Xing Xing. Xing Xing’s mother’s dying instructions had been that Xing Xing, and Xing Xing only, should take care of her father, performing some of the duties normally reserved for a wife. Stepmother, who shows an outward reverence for the wishes of the dead—more out of fear than love—grudgingly respects Xing

Xing's mother's wishes. She calls Xing Xing "Lazy One," treats her as a servant, abuses her, and thinks to expiate her behavior by performing rituals of ancestor worship at the grave of Master Wu.

Napoli expands upon an element of the story in Chinese variants in which a stepmother assigns a specific task to the heroine (Ting, 11). In the T'ang version, for example, Sheh Hsien is asked to watch over "fruit in the courtyard" while her stepmother and sister attend the festival (Jameson, 76). In *Bound*, Xing Xing is presented with her task when Stepmother hears that the traveling medicine man, a *lang zhong*, is in the vicinity. She sends Xing Xing to find him and bring him back to their cave to heal Wei Pei. As payment, Xing Xing is to take the unripe green dates that she has picked from the family tree and promote their use as medicine. She is to tell the lie that Wei Pei is skilled with medicinal plants as a ruse to attract a husband for her stepsister. As discussed later in this chapter, the journey that Xing Xing undertakes is an educative one. When she returns home, her stepmother and Wei Pei are weak and haggard and seem "demented" (*Bound*, 113). The stench of the filthy cave reaches Xing Xing as she rounds the bamboo maze that her mother has built to fend off demons. Xing Xing takes charge of washing Stepmother and her stepsister and also tends to Wei Pei's feet. But the incident that spurs Xing Xing to defy her stepmother is the woman's unforgivable treachery in killing the beautiful carp that swims in the spring-fed pool and making from its flesh a fish stew. Napoli builds upon this murderous act (also recounted in the T'ang version) to show how the malice of the Stepmother strikes at the heart of Xing Xing's relationship with her own mother.

### **A Mother's Spirit**

Napoli places emphasis on Xing Xing's relationship with the spirit of her maternal mother—a relationship that lies at the center of the story. From the beginning of the novel, there are passages with imagery that evoke the presence of the maternal body and the tenderness of a loving relationship between daughter and mother. "The spirit of her mother brushed her cheeks. The girl closed her eyes and let the spirit brush her eye-lids, her ears, her temple, her lips" (*Bound*, 19). Xing Xing speaks frequently to her mother's spirit, which she believes follows her. There is no fairy godmother figure, as in some Westernized versions of Cinderella. Napoli draws, rather, on Chinese folkloric traditions in which Asian variants of

the Cinderella story have incorporated the belief in the reincarnation of the heroine's mother into a helpful animal spirit.

Xing Xing finds consolation from Stepmother's abuses in her friendship with the carp that she sees in the spring-fed pond near the family cave. When the fish swims into her pail, Xing Xing takes it home for Wei Pei's amusement and places it in one of her father's bowls on which, emblazoned in bright colors, is the "legendary story of the carp at Dragon Gate," which tells how the carp that successfully leap Dragon Gate are turned into dragons (*Bound*, 23). Xing Xing herself had written the inscription at the bottom of the bowl: "li"—meaning "carp" or "advantage," depending on the lilt of the voice (*Bound*, 24). Napoli weaves this legend into Xing Xing's relationships with her parents. She relates her father's teaching about the differences between the "negative *ying*" and the "positive *yang*" to her relationship with her mother. She thinks about the fish with its unblemished "white scales . . . pure white brightness, like the positive energies of the universe." She, too, muses Xing Xing, although a girl, has more "affinity" to the *yang*, because of her name, which also evokes "a sense of brightness" (*Bound*, 44). The circle is completed as Xing Xing relates the dragon, as the animal that most embodies *yang*, to the carp who wishes to be a dragon and who, therefore, like Xing Xing, was drawn to the *yang*. She and the fish, therefore, share a bond. The carp nibbles at her fingers while she calls upon her mother's spirit for comfort; and later Xing Xing feeds the carp with her "shizhi," the "forefinger," which she uses to feed herself (*Bound*, 173). The carp, she observes, is as "white as a peony," the color of her mother's favorite flower (*Bound*, 21). The association between the carp and her mother's spirit continues during the journey that Xing Xing undertakes on behalf of Stepmother, as the carp takes on the role of an animal helper during the journey. On her return home, Xing Xing finally understands that her carp and her mother are one and the same.

The two of them circled around each other like white ribbons, making the water swirl behind them. They slid past each other, touching wholly, like mother and child. And at last Xing Xing understood. . . . The beautiful fish was the reincarnation of Mother. They were together again, at last. (*Bound*, 117)

In *Bound*, as in the T'ang version, the bones of the carp, hidden by Stepmother in a dung heap, become instrumental in securing the finery

that belonged to Xing Xing's mother, enabling the poor young cave woman to attend the festival. Napoli's version differs from the T'ang version in that Napoli dispenses with the intermediary male figure who appears to inform Sheh Hsien of the supernatural power of the bones. Napoli, rather, strengthens the importance of the relationship between a daughter and a mother in the novel by making Xing Xing's mother the direct source of the gifts that enable her daughter to escape her life with Stepmother and to secure her future with a prince.

In placing emphasis on Xing Xing's relationship with her mother, Napoli also revises the romance plot of the traditional Cinderella tale. In patriarchal cultures, the mother-daughter relationship is set aside when women marry. In *Bound*, the relationship retains its significance as Xing Xing weaves her relationship with her mother into her new relationship with the prince. She associates her mother with the dragons on the prince's sleeves. Her mother "was a carp," Xing Xing tells the prince. Xing Xing's mother and the prince are metaphorically brought together as Xing Xing tells the prince that his "lip is as white as [her] mother's scales" (*Bound*, 183). She is lucky to recognize her ancestors, the prince replies. Perhaps, he intimates, her mother had become a dragon, thus recognizing and accepting Xing Xing's wish to bring together her mother and himself, her future husband. Napoli constructs a circular mother-daughter narrative, beginning with Xing Xing's first sighting of the fish on the first page and closing with the intimate association made between the lips of her prince and the carp. In *Bound* as in *Spinners*, Napoli's choice of language and imagery in writing about the importance of a mother in a daughter's emotional life accords with feminists who have written about the centrality of this relationship to young women.

### A Journey

In both *Bound* and *Beast*, Napoli uses a journey to serve as a testing ground and educative experience for her protagonists. On her journey to find the *lang zhong*, Xing Xing discovers what it means to be a young woman in the wider world—the world of her father—outside her female-dominated cave home. Through her encounters with different male characters, Xing Xing learns whom and whom not to trust and when and when not to demonstrate her special skills. Stepmother, for example, had assured Xing Xing that she would not be molested on her journey because she was small and

wore a loose-fitting dress so that she would appear to be a child. In going against her better judgment in accepting a ride on a cart with a man who looks “at her in that way men look at unmarried women in the village,” Xing Xing finds out just how vulnerable she is as a young woman traveling alone (*Bound*, 69).

Through her encounter with the *lang zhong*, Xing Xing meets an alternative representative of the male world. He makes clear he is disinterested in her femaleness but offers her food and finally listens to her story when she trusts him enough to be honest about her family and why she seeks his help. But Xing Xing also begins to be aware of the subtle interplay between honesty and deception, as the medicine man saves both of them from her honest error of inscribing on his bottles the trademark of an official pharmacist over his own crude lettering. She is given the opportunity to demonstrate her skills in a legitimate way, when the sea captain with whom she voyages home requests that she paint his poem on the sails of his ship. In the company of the sea captain, Xing Xing experiences a carnivalesque moment as he makes grotesque faces and encourages her to do likewise. Xing Xing thinks it might be a “sign of madness” but then remembers that the slave boy she had met earlier also enjoyed making distorted faces (*Bound*, 110). Stephens points out that the use of the carnivalesque in texts for young people is “grounded in a playfulness” and associated with “nonconformity.”<sup>4</sup> Among other uses, it can be used to challenge “authoritative figures” (Stephens, 122). By the repetition of these incidents, Napoli emphasizes their importance in Xing Xing’s journey. Xing Xing emerges from her journey more ready to recognize and acknowledge the deceit of Stepmother, and ready, even, to tease a prince—a prince who, moreover, likes to travel.

### Transformation

Xing Xing had changed gradually in the weeks since her fish-mother was killed. She was determined to be no one’s fool anymore. She felt strong. A strong woman in a world that tried to deny the very existence of such a thing. (*Bound*, 176–177)

Napoli re-envisioned the traditional Westernized script of Cinderella by creating a female protagonist who succeeds in bettering her position by using her own power. In discussing Xing Xing’s character, Judith Ridge points

out that Xing Xing is revealed early on in the novel as an “unconventional” Cinderella figure.<sup>5</sup> Xing Xing’s “obedience,” Ridge observes, is “a deliberate choice made from a well-developed sense of self-preservation” rather than from “a passivity and lack of agency” (Ridge, 40). In her analysis of *Bound*, Ridge argues that Xing Xing, silenced by Stepmother, has a rich inner voice, but it is her encounter with the *lang zhong* who “allows her to speak” that is instrumental in enabling her to find her voice (Ridge, 50). This speaking-out is visible in Xing Xing’s open defiance of Stepmother. She begins by being honest with herself about how she is treated. She now describes Wei Pei’s and Stepmother’s behavior toward her as being manipulative. She speaks with a “new boldness” when she suspects Stepmother’s duplicity in killing her fish-mother (*Bound*, 134). After her first grief is spent, she directly accuses Stepmother of killing the carp, without displaying signs of fear. Refusing to be quelled by Stepmother’s threats, she dissembles and pretends to be “her old obedient self” (*Bound*, 142). She feigns pain so that she cannot, as Stepmother had planned, take Wei Ping in a cart to the cave festival. The antithesis of a passive Cinderella figure, Xing Xing’s defiance and her actions in recovering her fish-mother’s bones from the dung heap lead her to the letter and the finery that her mother has left for her: the “green silk dress,” the “kingfisher-feathered cloak,” and, of course, the “gold shoes” (*Bound*, 153).

The Opies make the point that Cinderella, in traditional versions, does not require a transformation to make her beautiful in features and that she possesses the attributes to be a princess.<sup>6</sup> The trait of beauty associated with fairy tale heroines is retained in Napoli’s retelling. Xing Xing is described by Master Tang as “attractive” before she dons her mother’s clothes (*Bound*, 132). Her feet are said to be naturally small so that they fit her mother’s gold shoes made for bound feet. Master Tang also declares that Xing Xing is virtuous because of her character and accomplishments. But Xing Xing is not presented as a model of virtue in the traditional sense. Indeed, Xing Xing’s transformation is one in which she becomes strong by refuting virtues of “unparalleled goodness” and obedience that are associated with the Cinderella figure (Opie, 11). The gold shoes are a symbol of strength. They exude “grace, as though any-one who wore them could walk through fear, through cruelty, and come out standing strong” (*Bound*, 154).

Her newfound self is visible at the cave festival, where she goes alone, dressed in her mother’s finery. She boldly accepts the offer of chopsticks

by young men and continues on without blushing. She tastes and samples every food and now wishes to travel beyond the borders of her home, “looking and tasting and smelling and hearing and feeling all the world had to offer” (*Bound*, 159). When the prince arrives, she knows she has the power to change her destiny.

### Revising the Traditional Romantic Plot

In her revisions of fairy tales, Napoli does not subvert the element in traditional romantic plots in which young women cross over boundaries of social class to marry princes. Rather, she changes the pattern of relationship between her female and male protagonists by the portrayal of dynamic, intelligent females who, through their own agencies, take control of their destinies as far as they are able to do so, and by nuanced representations of masculinities that are not the all-powerful male. In representing her female and male protagonists differently in regard to issues of power and gender, Napoli pushes at the boundaries of cultural and ideological constraints. As stated in a review, Napoli’s retelling of the Cinderella story in *Bound* is “both subversive and rooted in tradition.”<sup>7</sup>

Xing Xing pushes gently at the limits of decorum as she negotiates with the prince, who has come to the cave looking for the owner of the lost shoe. While she is deferential, she is not, as he notes, “subservient” (*Bound*, 180). Xing Xing gently teases the prince, which serves to deflate his image, as she tells him that his “padded clothing can make one appear fatter and, so, wiser than he is” (*Bound*, 180). She brings a sense of the absurd to their repartee by laughing at his “funny” hat (*Bound*, 182). As discussed already, she takes ownership of the dragons woven on his sleeve by relating them to her own mother. The prince gives recognition to the name her mother has given her and links it to his own Ming family name, which means “bright” or “destiny” when said in a different tone. Xing Xing is a “star . . . destined to be the brightness of [his] life” (*Bound*, 182–183). Xing Xing takes the lead in a dialogue based on disclosure and understanding. She will not be “bought or sold”; neither will he (*Bound*, 183). As in so many of Napoli’s novels, including *Beast*, a young woman’s education is an important aspect of equality. Xing Xing can read and write; so can he. As in *Spinners* and *Crazy Jack*, the association of marriage for reasons of wealth alone is weakened: The prince does not need a dowry. Once a mutual understanding has been reached, Xing Xing, in a signifi-

cant reversal of precedent, proffers her hand to the prince, who takes it. Napoli affirms in the novel's final sentences the freedom and choice that Xing Xing has achieved. The title of the book is given a double meaning as Napoli releases the term *bound* from its association with Xing Xing's servitude to Stepmother and associates it with Xing Xing's moving forward and outward to a better future. For, it is narrated, "it's bound to be better with a companion who knows how to be tender, a companion you may grow to cherish" (*Bound*, 184).

*Bound* was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults list winner. Napoli returns to the theme of young women who are bound by constraints of gender in *Hush*, discussed in chapter 6, and in *Smile* and the *Daughter of Venice* in chapter 7.

### ***BEAST***

Napoli bases this novel on Charles Lamb's poem "Beauty and the Beast. Or, a Rough Outside with a Gentle Heart," in which the Beast is imagined as a Persian prince, Orasmyn, who has been transformed into a lion by a fairy. In her notes to *Beast*, Napoli explains that the importance of gardens and roses in Persian history and culture and the importance of the lion in Persian folklore made Lamb's version an obvious choice on which to base her retelling. In *Beast*, Prince Orasmyn is portrayed as a young man who has a passion for gardens and particularly for the special roses—*gulbaye sourkh*—that he grows at Shiraz. He is the designer of gardens at three of his father's palaces and works in them alongside servants. His delight in plants and the fruit of the trees he grows is shown in rich descriptive passages in which he describes their colors and scents. One of the crucial differences between Napoli's retelling and Lamb's poem, other than narrative form, is that Napoli provides a background for Prince Orasmyn. He is imagined, in *Beast*, to be the son of the Shah of Persia, a devout young Muslim, whose transformation into a lion is the result of a curse placed upon him by a *pari* in the gardens of his father's palace in Tabriz. In preparation for her retelling of the tale, Napoli "plunged into research on Iran: political and daily history, food, music, language, literature, fine arts, and, of course, religion." She especially mentions learning about Islam and the misconceptions and "myths" that misrepresent Islamic faith.<sup>8</sup> The principles of Islamic faith together with rituals of worship are integrated

into her story. Prince Orasmyn is shaped by his religious beliefs, and the teachings of Mohammed are shown to be vital to how he conducts his life. He believes in these principles: "Whoever I am, wherever I go, whatever I do, I believe them" (*Beast*, 217).

Napoli constructs a rich cultural context for an educated Persian prince who loves literature by intertextualizing, into her story, references to and excerpts from Persian and classical books with which Orasmyn is familiar. Napoli shows how these texts also contribute toward constructing Orasmyn's way of looking at the world and his place in it, for he uses them to help him make sense of what is happening in his own life. Orasmyn's continued access to literature is important to him when he is transformed into a lion. As recognized in a review in *Horn Book Magazine*, "Napoli takes full advantage of her delight in language and her knowledge of linguistics" as is shown by the Farsi and Arabic vocabulary that is integrated into the text as well as the inclusion of some short passages (in Latin) from *The Aeneid*.<sup>9</sup> In her author's notes, Napoli provides explanations for the glossary and for any differences between Farsi and Arabic. She chooses to employ a "transliteration considered 'ordinary'" by Iranians she consulted, even if it was not "the most frequently used transliteration in the literature about Islam." This is because, she writes, the "point of view is consistently that of Orasmyn, raised with Persian traditions within a Muslim world" (*Beast*, 260).

Lamb's verse story of "Beauty and the Beast" is narrated anonymously with the exception of one stanza, "Beauty's Song at Her Spinning Wheel," which is set to music and sung in Beauty's voice. In Napoli's retelling, Prince Orasmyn tells his own story. The novel is structured into four parts: "The Curse," "Strange Life," "Lion," and "New World," each of which deals with a new phase in Prince Orasmyn's life as prince and lion. In her study *Beauty and the Beast*, Hearne notes that the "central aspects of the story endure from century to century, medium to medium, culture to culture."<sup>10</sup> She outlines elements that are constant in the tale that have survived from the first popularized version for children by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont in 1756, which was based, in turn, on the version by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Gallon de Villeneuve in 1740. Fundamental elements found in Napoli's retelling include the central character of the Beast who is transformed into a prince, a narrative structure that depends on a journey, the setting of the Beast's garden, and the request for a rose by a daughter whose relationship with her father and siblings is part of

the story. How Napoli adapts these enduring elements of the Beauty and Beast tale is discussed in the following sections. Discussion also focuses on how Napoli brings new meanings to the tale by redefining the gendered relationship between a beauty and a beast and by bringing the tenets of Islam and the culture of Persia into her story.

### **A Muslim Prince**

The representation of the Beast in the traditional tale is one in which the outward appearance of a monster conflicts with his inner nature. In her analysis of the beast figure, Hearne observes that he “has none of the traditional male accoutrements of power and daring” but “shows traditionally female attributes of delicate respect for Beauty’s feelings,” namely, “nurturance, comfort, gentleness, and patience, all of which he has learned through a humbling experience” (Hearne, 133). The subtitle of Lamb’s poem also places emphasis on the inner gentleness of the Beast. In the first two parts of *Beast*, “The Curse” and “Strange Life,” Napoli introduces readers to a Muslim prince who possesses some of the characteristics of the beast figure found in other versions of the tale. On the first page, Orasmyn is engaged in looking at one of his favorite books, *Shahnameh*, a collection of stories in Persian about warriors and battles, and draws back, “aghast,” from an illustration of a warrior about to kill a beast (*Beast*, 3). He hates the idea of killing. He does not take part in his father’s hunts and has run from the “spilling of blood” at sacrifices. His mother has commented that he is “more tender than flesh should be” (*Beast*, 6). She had also commented on the “anguish” in the beast’s eyes in the illustration in his book (*Beast*, 4). Napoli intensifies the division between gentle prince and beast. She draws attention to the irony of a transformation that turns a gentle and sensitive prince into the King of the Beasts who must hunt and kill his prey, and who strives to control an animalistic passion. She also provides the background and reasons for the curse that is absent from Lamb’s poem and traditional versions.

Orasmyn is a devout young Muslim who has already been on a pilgrimage to Mecca. At the beginning of part I, “The Curse,” Orasmyn is preparing to serve as a “*hajji*—a pilgrim” at the Feast of Sacrifices, where he will assist with the killing of a camel (*Beast*, 5). He is dressed in the white robes that stand for purity and has performed *wudhu*—the ritual of washing before evening prayers. Represented as a young man who is

ardent in pursuing his faith, he is fasting over and above what is required of him for the Feast. Nevertheless, Orasmyn makes a fatal error of misjudgment in approving the rightness of a particular camel for the sacrifice that day. The camel that his servant had procured is “defiled,” for it had suffered pain caused by the taking of fat from its hump, a practice forbidden by Muhammad (*Beast*, 10). Orasmyn’s misjudgment stems from his imperfect knowledge of the Qur’an regarding prohibitions and sacrifice, and also from his reliance on a competing discourse, his former nursemaid’s belief that sacrificial meat was necessary to satisfy people’s needs. Being a prince with a tender heart, Orasmyn also wishes his servant to avoid the severe punishment that would be administered for choosing an unsuitable camel. A proud young man, he refuses to ask for help from the “*imam*—the prayer leader” in making his decision because he, the Shah’s son, should have known the right course. He is convinced that to consult with anyone would show a “weakness” (*Beast*, 11). This pride in his own judgment leads to his fall—a pride that is reiterated in the text through his repeated assertions that he, a prince, does not need any help.

### Retribution and a Curse

Napoli situates Orasmyn’s fall from grace within the context of religious and traditional beliefs. He experiences the meaning of sacrifice, transgression, retribution, and suffering. He has transgressed religious protocol; there would be “retribution,” he is told by the spirit, or *pari*, who has taken on the likeness of the camel (*Beast*, 29). The *pari* is unimpressed by Orasmyn’s promise to recant by further studying the Qur’an. Orasmyn has no understanding, he is told, and he should review the “five basic principles of faith.” The fourth principle, Orasmyn realizes, speaks of reward and punishment by “divine justice” for one’s actions (*Beast*, 30). Orasmyn’s punishment is that he will be slain by his father.

Transgression and retribution are followed by seduction, which lies in wait for a youth feeling the stirrings of sexual desire. At seventeen, Orasmyn is consumed with thoughts about love. As a Muslim youth, he is taken up with desire to peer behind the veil. He is looking forward to his father’s choice of a wife for him. He will be the “first adult male outside the young woman’s family to set eyes on her bare face, to ever know her mysteries” (*Beast*, 4). Napoli refers to her attraction to the “sensuality” associated with the veil as an element of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Orasmyn’s heightened

awareness of the erotic is revealed through language associating the sensuousness of desire with flowers and fruits. He describes how, in the fields of Kashmir, his “hands have swept away the brush from around the autumn wild crocuses with their orange-red stigmata and styles” (*Beast*, 23). Before the first appearance of the *pari* in his “sacred” pool, he passes “lotus trees, the symbol of fertility.” If he had not been fasting, he would have chewed the “aphrodisiac *sendjed*—Bavarian olive” in his “Garden of Paradise” (*Beast*, 26). On his way to the mosque to seek advice from his father, he is lured to break his fast by dates in the basket of a servant girl. He persuades himself that he was meant to pass by that way, for dates were an antidote to sorcery. Their sweetness only made him wish for more. But “the sugary juice” that “shocks” Orasmyn’s tongue is, perhaps, also a reminder to Orasmyn of the sugar placed on the camel’s tongue before she is sacrificed (*Beast*, 45). He had understood the camel’s willingness to cooperate, for he also had a liking for sweet things (*Beast*, 9).

In a scene reminiscent of Jack’s experience in the castle in *Crazy Jack*, Orasmyn is led astray after his meeting with his father by calls for his aid from the servant girl, who appears to have been assaulted. Her clothes are disheveled. She no longer wears her *chador*. He can see her “smooth, dark skin” (*Beast*, 49). Seductively, she clings to Orasmyn, who glimpses “the curve of her breast” and fights against temptation. He struggles to remember the precepts of his faith while his “groin throbs” (*Beast*, 51). When he asks who was responsible for her attack, she whispers his name, for she is Zanejadu, the *pari* who had taken the disguise of the camel. Napoli’s retelling touches with traditional versions as the *pari* tells him that he is “trapped” and it would take a “woman’s love” to “undo the curse” (*Beast*, 52). Napoli invests roses with meanings over and above those associated with love and desire in the traditional tale. They are a symbol of seduction, for the *pari*’s breath smells of “roses” and the flesh on the back of her hand is as “thick as rose flesh” (*Beast*, 51). They also take on a religious significance as Orasmyn’s feet are stabbed by rose thorns in fleeing from the *pari* who had appeared to him in his rose garden.

Napoli presents a culture that is shaped by traditional beliefs that co-exist with Islam. Orasmyn and his father make sense of the curse by drawing on traditional beliefs in *parian* and *djinn*—disguised spirits who are mentioned in the Qur’an. The curse, Orasmyn is told by his father, is a *djinn*’s curse; the sacrifice and the need for forgiveness was a matter for God. Orasmyn will keep to his room during the hunt and pray, and all will be well.

### A Son and His Father

Orasmyn's story is also the story of the love between a son and his father. Napoli emphasizes the tenderness of this love in a passage in which Orasmyn's father holds his son close, telling him that he loves him despite his avoidance of hunting. Napoli brings both a religious and a literary significance to the relationship. The religious ritual of sacrifice is associated with the slaying of a much-loved son by his father. Orasmyn, transformed into the body of a lion, approaches his parent in a scene in which he seems to offer himself up to his father, who had vowed to kill a lion during the hunt. He tells how he lowers his neck, but as his father's hands tighten, he knocks his father away. He realizes that the *pari*'s curse will be successful and that the Shah will be "aghast" at killing his own son (*Beast*, 84). The word *aghast* links back to Orasmyn's response to the slaying of the beast by the warrior at the beginning of the novel. The awfulness of the curse is also intensified for Orasmyn, for he associates it with the story "Rustam and Sohrab," one of the great stories in *Shahnameh*, in which the great Rustam mistakenly kills his warrior son—only recognizing him as he thrusts his dagger into his chest. Orasmyn realizes now that, as a lion, he will always be the beast hunted on the grounds belonging to his father.

### Metamorphosis and Journeys

Napoli uses metamorphosis as a metaphor for development, as the young man is transformed by his experiences. Orasmyn's perception of waking in the body of a different being is vividly conveyed as he realizes that the lion's shadow he sees before him is his own, that the lion's paw he sees is *his* paw. The long hours Napoli spent in watching lions and reading about them is evident in Orasmyn's detailed descriptions of the mental and physical effort of learning to live and move in a different body (Currier, 2). His head feels extraordinarily heavy; he tries to visualize how four-legged animals walk; he sees in shades of gray, black, and white, although he sees a blue sky. He had lacked true understanding, the *pari* had told him. Later, during his wanderings and near death, Orasmyn understands that he has been "transformed from the one who offers [the sacrifice] to the offering itself" (*Beast*, 112). Orasmyn had been all too ready to satisfy his appetites for sweet things and carnal desire. Now, he knows what it is like to live life as a beast subjected to the demands of his animal instincts: the ravenous

hunger that has to be immediately satiated and the hot urge to mate when he meets lionesses. Ridge argues that Orasmyn's transformation allows "him a freedom to express the sexual/animalistic urges he had previously suppressed" (Ridge, 98).

Some of the most powerful passages in part II, "Strange Life," and in part III, "Lion," are those in which Orasmyn experiences, with anguish, his split subjectivity of being both Muslim prince and lion. He recounts his suffering when, in satisfying the needs of his lion body, he offends against the tenets of his religion. After sharing a carcass with lionesses, he is conscious of what he has done: "All without the *wudu* that cleanses body and soul first. All without prayer. And so much blood" (*Beast*, 71). Napoli uses the concept of the mind/body split in constructing the consciousness of Orasmyn/lion: "The lion in me prevails not only over body, but over spirit. I fool myself to hope otherwise" (*Beast*, 94). With the consciousness and reason that govern his thoughts, Orasmyn, a Muslim prince, justifies his eating raw flesh. He knows, for example, the contradictions between religious precepts and practices based on traditional ways. His mother and father would not eat blood, but people had done so before Islam had come to Persia. Napoli continues to show how Orasmyn draws on literature to sustain his spirit. When he kills and eats a wild boar, knowing that eating pork is forbidden, he remembers how Persian heroes Bizhan and Rustam hunted and ate boar, so he comforts himself that he will be forgiven.

Orasmyn's outward journeys mirror his inward suffering. He travels almost to the limit of endurance, seeking a place where he can find peace. His wanderings in India are likened to a wandering in the wilderness. The religious connotations are reinforced by scenes in which he passes days without food or water while the word "*taj*—crown" reverberates in his head along with the image of his father. He will never, he realizes, be crowned. His spirit revives when he refuses the idea of being sacrificed to the *pari*. The chant in his head now changes to prayer: "There is only one God, and that is God"—a chant that carries him to a place of euphoria. He believes he has briefly seen "*tawhid*—the unity that bridges the distance between human and God" (*Beast*, 112). But pride, for Orasmyn, continues to be an issue, as he is forced to accept that he cannot fight and win against the pride of ruling males when he attempts to join lionesses and their cubs. Defeated, he returns to Tabriz believing he is fated to live out his days alone.

Napoli also underscores the traditional significance of roses in the Beauty and the Beast tale. When Orasmyn had left his father's palace as lion, he had rolled "around the *gulbaye sourkh*—my dear, dear rosebuds—aching for the loss of so much, of everything gentle, of everything good" (*Beast*, 85). In Tabriz, he retrieves Saadi's "*Gulistan—Rose Garden*," the book of verse his mother had given him (*Beast*, 151). The verses sing about love and desire and serve as catalysts that inspire him to journey to France where, he has heard, the roses are unsurpassed, and where women are associated with "perfume of roses" (*Beast*, 133). It is in France, he is convinced, where he will find the woman whose love can break the curse. After two years of traveling, he reaches his destination.

"I've been sleeping among my roses," narrates Orasmyn/lion at the beginning of the section entitled "A Man" (*Beast*, 139). Once established at the deserted castle he has found in France, Orasmyn spends, as he did in Persia, his time and effort in designing and establishing gardens. Now, he takes small rose bushes from neighboring gardens and replants them to make a small rose garden that he plans to make "inviting" for the woman he intends to entice there. This rose garden is his *belaq*—his "sacred garden" (*Beast*, 160), hence his consternation when the man who invades his privacy takes a whole branch of his beloved flowers, which are symbolic of his hopes for redemption. Orasmyn moves from instinctual anger to reason and then to despair at the man's failure to understand him as other than some beast possessing "demonic powers" before he finally resorts to threatening demands. Orasmyn has need of the daughter "who loves roses" (*Beast*, 163).

### Desiring Prince/Lusting Lion

Orasmyn's preparations for the arrival of the girl child, echo, in kind, although not in details, the Beast's preparations in traditional versions (and also in Lamb's poem) as he transforms a bleak castle into a home. The scene awaiting Belle in the great hall is full of romantic imagery as Orasmyn describes the arrangement of bowls containing candles, roses, honey, and almonds. The first impressions of Belle are full of mystery and allure as, observed by Orasmyn, she steps "right foot first" over the castle's threshold with covered head in the manner of a Persian woman (*Beast*, 189). He watches as she walks slowly around the bowls before she slips one hand from her sleeve so that she might dip an almond into honey,

which she demurely places in her mouth. In Orasmyn's fertile mind, Greek myth meets Persian culture, as he remembers Persephone and the pomegranate seeds, and wonders whether the young woman might think that she had "come to marry the King of the Underworld" (*Beast*, 190). The motif associated with Persian culture and womanhood—what is covered and uncovered—runs through the text. Orasmyn refers to Belle's courage in accepting what lies hidden beyond the light of her candle as well as accepting what is visible.

In Madame de Beaumont's traditional version, the Beast asks Beauty to marry him each night before retiring. In Lamb's poem, the Beast is said to only ask Beauty that he be permitted to "observe [her] sup."<sup>12</sup> He is described as sitting humbly or standing submissively yet "ne'er presumed to touch the food." He does, however, bend the "raptured ear, Or, ravish'd eye, to see or hear" (Lamb, 59). The romantic discourse of traditional versions is displaced in *Beast* by one of sexuality, eroticism, and desire. Napoli builds upon the idea of the ravishment implied by the "ravish'd eye" in Lamb's poem as Orasmyn perceives Belle through the double gaze of Muslim prince and lion:

I see the tiny pulse in her slender neck. I hear her soft breath. I smell the parts of her hidden under her frock. She is doelike.

Meat.

The unbidden thought takes me by surprise. Self-loathing steals my breath. (*Beast* 192)

Belle's sexuality, associated with the allure of what lies hidden and with what is also exposed, is perceived as especially threatening for Orasmyn. Orasmyn's split subjectivity is made evident as he experiences himself as lion: "If only I could shed this hateful body. If only I could flee this hateful self" (*Beast*, 193). He sleeps and eats away from the castle; he tears at his flesh with his claws to remind himself that he is a lion and she a woman. When he sees Belle bending over picking capers from a bush, he is seized with the "urge to mate," which makes him feel "hot and savage." He asks "the Merciful One" to "stop" him "or kill" him (*Beast*, 218). He leaves bloody smears on his face so that Belle should see him as he really is. The difficulty of reining in his animal passions is repeated in a scene in which Belle playfully splashes water at him. He responds in like manner, but then overcome with the sight of Belle—perceived now as "woman" with her long hair and warm body under "clinging wet cloth"—he lunges (*Beast*, 236).

### Belle and “Bon Ami”

Napoli describes a renegotiation of the power relations between the Beauty and the Beast. Belle might be the object of Orasmyn’s gaze, but he sees a complex young woman who is “smart and brave and good” (*Beast*, 239). As she comes to terms with her situation, she begins to take control of the relationship between herself and “Bon Ami,” as she calls Orasmyn. She does not ask “permission”; she does not apologize (*Beast*, 203). She works to achieve a more equal relationship between them in a situation where a male beast would seem to have the natural advantage. Their relationship is first built through the sharing of books. At the beginning of the novel, Orasmyn tells how he is a student of languages and is acquainted with French, Latin, Greek, and Turkish, as well as Arabic. As a lion, Orasmyn is represented as no longer having full access to the power of language. He can only communicate with humans by scratching words with his paw or through using body language. He reads with his lion eyes with difficulty but has persevered in reading books in the castle library, including Aristotle, because books provide him with the “only opportunity to keep language strong inside” him. Language is his “human vehicle for prayer”—his “life-line” (*Beast*, 146). He begins to depend on Belle for fuller and easier access to the texts. Orasmyn begs, insists, that Belle read to him. He makes the analogy between Aeneas’s wanderings in the third book of *The Aeneid* with his journey to the castle in which he, like Aeneas, feels lost and desperate. When she refuses to read more about war in the second book of *The Aeneid* because of the distress it brings upon women, he brings her a volume of Ovid’s love poetry. It is left to readers to make the ironic connection with Ovid’s other notable work, *Metamorphoses*, a collection of myths that involve some form of transformations achieved by supernatural means.

As in *Bound and Spinners*, Napoli stresses the importance of a young woman’s access to literacy and education. Belle, who reads the Latin verses of *The Aeneid* to Orasmyn, is represented as having access to the power of language, thus subverting theories that devalue women’s status in relationship to language and patriarchy. The acknowledgment is made that women have frequently lived on the margins of patriarchy as Belle writes her own story on the margins of a Chinese book. She permits Orasmyn to read it, telling him that her story “is all that’s left of” her (*Beast*, 205). Belle’s own voice is heard as Orasmyn reads her thoughts and emotions about him: “I am lost. What the beast wants of me, I cannot know” (*Beast*,

223). The diary enables her side of the story to be told without Orasmyn's mediation. Her diary is also the means by which elements from the traditional tale are integrated into the story. Taking control of her own history, Belle writes about her family and her merchant father's loss of ships, the resulting poverty, her role in taking over the housekeeping, her sisters' disdain and their refusal to help, and her father's last trip when he learns that the cargo in the ships that he thought had been saved had been lost to pirates. She also writes about her sisters' requests for gifts and her own for a rose.

The equalizing of the power relationship between the beauty and beast figures is present in Lamb's poem, for example, in the line: "Monster timid, mild, Led like the lion by the child" (Lamb, 58). Napoli builds on Lamb's simile as Belle offers to help Orasmyn by taming his bestial nature. She washes his jaws that reek with blood. In scenes of shared domesticity, Belle makes Orasmyn the honeyed cakes he so likes. She builds an outdoor oven and cooks meat so that they can share meals out in the open as a family. In a symbolic reversal of power, Belle mounts and rides Orasmyn: "The beauty rides the beast" (*Beast*, 231). The establishment of a compatible relationship between Belle and Orasmyn is also grounded in a reciprocal respect for each other's religion. Belle, who is a Roman Catholic, suggests that they pray together. She performs *wudhu* and follows his lead in bending to the ground in a *rakat*. Again, Orasmyn makes reference to the literature that so influences him as he thinks of a verse of Rumi's *Divan-e-Shams* about the blending together of East and West. Is it possible that he and Belle be so "compassionately blended?" (*Beast*, 243). There is an acknowledgment of difference and sameness, for their words of prayer are constructed from different articles of faith, but they agree that they pray to the "one God" (*Beast*, 238). On a biographical note, Napoli mentions in an interview that although her Catholic grandmother was born in Egypt, the family did not have any connection to Islam. Islam was like "a mystery waiting for" her. Napoli says that "when the lion in [her] story chants," she "feels dizzy" as though she is "moved outside" herself (Currier, 3).

### A Transformed Prince

As in *Bound*, a transformative relationship is made dependent on the transformation of character. In order for the curse to be broken, Orasmyn must let go of the pride to which he has held fast as prince and as lion.

When Belle finally returns to the castle after visiting her sick father, the Beast's life is ebbing away. She tells him that she had missed him and her life at the castle and allows that he needed her as she had not been needed before. Orasmyn narrates that "all pride flames and turns to ash" as he also acknowledges to himself how much he needs Belle (*Beast*, 255). He then hears her declaration of love. Hearne argues that the "transformed prince" at the end of the tale in traditional versions pales by comparison with the "power and vulnerability" of the beast figure (Hearne, 134). From the beginning of the novel, Napoli brings a greater weight to the character of the transformed prince by using the trope of metamorphosis to show the change from an egotistical adolescent into a mature young man. Napoli reinforces the religious aspect of this transformation through the first-person narrative of a Muslim prince who holds true to his religious belief throughout his ordeals. Napoli speaks of the "encompassing" nature of Islamic belief (Currier, 3). It is this vision of Islam that is presented in *Beast* as Orasmyn brings together his love, passion, and Islamic faith. At the close of the novel, Orasmyn narrates how he and Belle "bow to the Merciful One" and that their tears form a "pool in His Honor" (*Beast*, 255).

*Beast* was awarded a 2001 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature. It has been translated into Farsi by Hossein Ebrahimi. On her website Inside Iran, Napoli writes in detail about her stay in Iran as guests of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, where she met Ebrahimi and others from the House of Translation, as well as children's authors. She also writes of meeting a range of people, including fervent Muslims, atheists, a Christian, and a Zoroastrian, all of whom seemed to be "integrated into Iranian society" (Napoli, 4). When asked, in an interview, what she hoped readers would take away from her novel, Napoli wished that they would have "entered Orasmyn—lived what he lived, learned what he learned." Although she does not tell a story to teach a lesson, she hopes that her story "will help some readers to be humane and compassionate not just toward others, but to themselves" (Currier, 3).

## NOTES

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  12. Charles Lamb, "Beauty and the Beast. Or, a Rough Outside with a Gentle Heart" (London: George Redway, 1886), 56 [available at <http://books.google.com>]. Hereafter referred to as Lamb.



## Chapter Five

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# Love and Honor: *The Great God Pan* and *Sirena*

NAPOLI WROTE *THE GREAT GOD PAN* as a companion novel to *Sirena* and regrets that they were not published as companion novels.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Greek myth, Napoli creates stories for young adults employing strategies similar to those that she uses in the retelling of fairy tales. Through her presentation of hybrid protagonists who fall in love with humans, Napoli raises issues and questions relevant to teens: identity issues, bodily appearance, sexuality, alienation, and death. Napoli writes about love, death, and sacrifice in the context of mythic worlds in which transformation into other forms by supernatural means and the co-existence of mortals and immortals are phenomena of everyday life. Central to both stories, based on Greek tragedies, are issues of individual agency and moral choice, as her protagonists reckon with the power of the gods.

### A MYTHICAL WORLD

In *The Great God Pan*, Napoli brings together two characters from Greek mythology: the goat-god, Pan, and Iphigenia, subject of two Greek tragedies by Euripides: *Iphigenei'a at Aulis* and *Iphigenei'a in Tauris*. The former deals with her sacrifice, the latter with her life as “the priestess of Artemis.”<sup>2</sup> Set at the beginning of the Trojan War, the first play relates how Artemis has demanded that Agamemnon, leader of the Trojan forces, sacrifice his most beautiful daughter, whom he believes to be Iphigenia, in order that his becalmed ships can sail for Troy. Napoli points out in her afterword that in the classical myth, a “hooved animal lay sacrificed on the ground

rather than the maiden" (*The Great God Pan*, 149). Iphigenia is next found in one of Artemis's temples, and the wind changes, allowing Agamemnon's ships to sail. There is no explanation given for Iphigenia's escape from the executioner. In *The Great God Pan*, the goat-god narrates his own story, falls in love with Iphigenia, and sacrifices his life to save her. Pan, Napoli explains in her notes, was the "only god who is ever reported to have died," and Greek scholars have debated whether there is a misinterpretation in a line from "Plutarch's *Moralia*" in which "the sailor Thamus calls out, 'The great god Pan is dead.'" But there are no explanations given for Pan's supposed death. Her story, Napoli explains, fills in the gaps by bringing Iphigenia and Pan together (*The Great God Pan*, 149).

Napoli, who studied Latin and *The Aeneid* in high school, also integrates the story of the Trojan War into the novel *Sirena*. In this book, she draws upon the story of Philoctetes, a Greek hero who, it is recounted in Homer's *Iliad*, was on his way to war in Troy when he was abandoned on the isle of Lemnos by his comrades because of his painful wound as a result of a snake bite.<sup>3</sup> The plight of Philoctetes is also the subject of a tragedy by Sophocles, "Philoctetes."<sup>4</sup> In Napoli's novel, Philoctetes is found by a mermaid, Sirena, who tends to his wound, thus saving his life. Sirena tells the story of her growing relationship and love with Philoctetes. But after ten years, their life together on Lemnos is threatened when Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive to persuade Philoctetes, who possesses the bow and arrows of Hercules, to go with them to Troy to avenge the death of Philoctetes' friend Achilles.

In both novels, Napoli constructs the wider context of the mythic worlds in which Sirena and Pan live through the narrative strategy of telling stories within stories as characters, including gods such as Apollo and Hermes, take part in listening to and telling the stories of gods and heroes. The five parts into which *Sirena* is divided contain title headings that reproduce themes common to both novels: "Deception," "Honesty," "The Years," "Immortality," and "Moral Choices." In Napoli's mythic worlds, honor and sacrifice are writ large. Her stories show young protagonists making life and death choices in a context in which prophecies and the manipulations of the gods would seem to control their futures.

### Hybrid Beings

"I am mermaid—hybrid and mortal" (*Sirena*, 43). Napoli says that she is fascinated by hybrids and their "dilemma" (Napoli, 3). In answer to

a question about her treatment of identity in her work for young adults, especially in regard to hybrid beings, she comments, "We are all hybrids in one way or another, but teens might be more aware of the pain of this kind of mix than younger or older people, since finding their own identities, constructing the self, these things are probably the major job of adolescence."<sup>5</sup> In *The Great God Pan* and *Sirena*, as she does in *Beast*, Napoli explores identity formation as her hybrid characters wrestle with issues of identity, body image, and sexuality. In each text, the hybrid body is shown to be a site of both celebration and anxiety.

Through their first-person narratives, *Sirena* and *Pan* express a strong sense of identity with their animal selves. *Sirena*'s comfortableness with her mermaid's body is shown in passages where she is described as being at home in her fish world. As she swims alone to the island of Lemnos, she is "aware of every part of" her body and describes her "long" fingers, her "thin" neck, her "warm and smooth" breasts. She describes her "fish half" as having "scales" that "flash" in the light and whose "colors suit the seas." Her spine is "sharp and supple" (*Sirena*, 42). *Sirena* also identifies herself with her sisterhood of mermaids as her first-person "I" switches to the "we" of community at the beginning of the novel: "We make ourselves beautiful" (*Sirena*, 3). She and her sisters "are seventeen years old now. All ten of us" (*Sirena*, 4). As discussed later, *Sirena* moves from constructing herself as part of a mermaid community to alienating herself from the other mermaids.

At the beginning of *The Great God Pan*, Napoli emphasizes the characteristics that identify Pan as the god of nature, who is at one with the pastures, forests, and "all nature" (*The Great God Pan*, 12). The "melody" from his flute is described as an integral part of the natural environment as it "plays out" his "world" (*The Great God Pan*, 78). He plays "the yellow doricum petal" and he plays "the small purple bells of the wood hyacinth" (*The Great God Pan*, 82). Half god, half goat, he describes how he experiences his animal half. He has "hooves that take off for a walk, a trot, a run, before [he] can even think to stop them" (*The Great God Pan*, 4). Napoli comments that when she was reading about Pan, she was attracted by the "incongruity" of the different ways in which he was represented, from a "sunny" and "randy" fellow to a "stormy" and drunken "lout" (Napoli, 3). Pan expresses his fractured sense of identity when he comments that, although he can transform into other shapes, he has been told that he cannot change into "all god or all goat" (*The Great God Pan*, 16). Pan's fragmented sense of self causes him to feel alienated from others. He does not know where he belongs—with the goats or the gods.

During much of the novel, he is depicted alone and refuses to go with his father, Hermes, to Olympus, which is, his father reminds him, his “true home” (*The Great God Pan*, 11). The squabbling among the gods bores him. He believes that “neither half of [him] can ever be whole” (*The Great God Pan*, 16). He expresses the desire to “transform into full goat, to be whole for a little while” so that he can experience “true belonging. Respite” (*The Great God Pan*, 43). As Napoli’s story unfolds, Pan questions those oppositions between animal and mortal, god and immortal that construct different aspects of his selfhood.

Napoli shows how her young hybrid protagonists, whether goat-god or mermaid, experience anxiety over their bodies when they fall in love. They are anxious as to how they might be perceived by humans of the opposite sex. For Sirena and her sister mermaids, it is the male gaze of sailors that causes them to be apprehensive about their bodies. Sirena narrates how she and her sister mermaids cover their tails with decorations, for their “tails” are their “enemies,” while they value their “lovely brown breasts”; and they hope that men will see “beyond” their “crossbred outer selves” (*Sirena*, 5). Sirena’s anxiety about her body image intensifies when she meets and falls in love with Philoctetes. She worries that she may not be regarded as “female” by him (*Sirena*, 91), that her tail repulses him (*Sirena*, 96), and that he looks away from her because he is “embarrassed” by her “fish half” (*Sirena*, 98). Philoctetes, however, accepts Sirena’s hybrid body, acknowledging that identity is multifaceted. He tells her: “We are all made of little pieces. We are all part this and part that” (*Sirena*, 102). In *The Great God Pan*, Napoli offers a perspective on the hybrid body from a male point of view. Pan, at first, tells how he feels “special among both gods and goats” (*The Great God Pan*, 16). When Pan meets the young girl Iphigenia, it is he, the male, who is constructed by the female gaze. He resents being told by her that he would make the “best pet” (*The Great God Pan*, 38). Feeling humiliated, he represses his goatish half. He is not an “animal,” he tells her when she refers to his “animal-spit” (*The Great God Pan*, 34). He points out that his face is not merely human, but god-like. Pan affiliates himself with the gods when he thinks of being immortal.

### **The Power of a Curse**

The state of being mortal or immortal structures the way in which Pan and Sirena think about themselves as hybrid beings. “Gods are immortal!” Pan

screams at a scorpion. As part god, he, Pan, cannot be killed (*The Great God Pan*, 12). Napoli brings together themes of death and sexuality in a powerful way. The curses laid upon Pan and Sirena by the gods not only control how they live their lives as hybrid beings but at the same time force them to confront their own mortality. Aphrodite had cursed Pan, the child of her half-brother Hermes and the nymph Dryope, with a hybrid body in revenge for the "misery" of her son, Hermaphroditus, who became both male and female when merged with a nymph. "I am goat and god," Pan comments, "because Aphrodite said Father behaved like a goat when he took her" (*The Great God Pan*, 16). There are echoes from the dilemma of Orasmyn in *Beast*, as Artemis has added a proviso to Aphrodite's curse: Pan can "never transform into goat or god unless" he loves "someone truly" and she loves him in return. Only then would he have a chance to "transform one last time" and be "whole" (*The Great God Pan*, 135). In *Sirena*, procreation is also associated with a curse. Sirena and her sisters were born from eggs resulting from Eros's seduction of a parrot fish, Little Iris, that had been captured by the nymph Rhodope. The jealous nymph swallowed the majority of Little Iris's eggs and cursed those that were saved. The mermaids, "unlike fish, unlike gods," could not mate with their father or brothers; they would be mortal unless they could lure a human to be their mate (*Sirena*, 27–28). The curse can, therefore, be understood as a specific discourse that invokes power over sexuality and the boundary between life and death.

Knowledge, as revealed in prophecy, is also directly associated with power and sexuality in these novels. Pan comments that the "child-woman, Cassandra," daughter of Priam, could not refuse Apollo's offer of "knowledge for sex" (*The Great God Pan*, 89). Napoli highlights the role of prophecy in both novels. Pan is aware of a smell of "burning flesh" when he is with Iphigenia and travels to Troy to consult Cassandra (*The Great God Pan*, 87). Napoli foreshadows, like a prophecy, the ending of Sirena's and Philoctetes' time together on Lemnos, for they "intertwine on the altar of doomed love" (*Sirena*, 153). The association between repression and "power, knowledge, and sexuality" theorized by Michel Foucault as endemic in Western culture<sup>6</sup> is heard in the warning to Sirena that her illicit relationship with Philoctetes will be "inevitably destroyed" (*Sirena*, 176).

The inevitability of death versus immortality is ever present for Pan and Sirena when they fall in love with mortals. Pan and Sirena question the value of immortality. Pan informs Hermes that if he were immortal, he

“would have spent the rest of eternity mourning” Iphigenia (*The Great God Pan*, 145). What good is immortality, Siren asks Mother Dora, if she lives and Philoctetes dies? “Is the millionth love that much more tender than the thousandth?” she asks (*Sirena*, 175). Underlying the stories of Pan and Sirena is the association of death, love, and sacrifice.

### Love and Desire

“Love is many things. Need. Hope. All that brought” Pan to her side, Iphigenia tells him (*The Great God Pan*, 142). Although love and desire are woven into the stories of other novels, Napoli writes about them in depth in *The Great God Pan* and *Sirena*. The first-person narratives of Pan and Sirena and other characters in the novels construct a discourse on different ways of thinking about love and sexuality. Pan knows that there is “a sea of difference between love and lust” (*The Great God Pan*, 20). Under the impression that his cursed form is meant to make him “unlovable,” he admits that his “goaty half enjoys the pleasures of many females without losing itself to any” (*The Great God Pan*, 16). In the chapter “Smeared Memories,” a series of fragmented thoughts about his aberrant past, Pan acknowledges the goatish behavior that has, prior to his undying love for Iphigenia, characterized his behavior. For example, he recalls:

Rolling in high grasses. Grainy smells in my nose. Hands tugging, kneading.  
Kisses. Some maenad or other.  
Sharp bursts of pleasure.  
I laugh till I gag. (*The Great God Pan*, 129)

One of the muses tells him that “pleasure is as good” and “love carries pain where lust does not” (*The Great God Pan*, 53). As in *Beast*, Napoli does not shy away from conveying the heat and pleasure of raw physical passion, but Pan separates himself from other hybrids such as satyrs, who are “bestial” (*The Great God Pan*, 10), and from centaurs, who have a reputation for rape. The love and relationship between Iphigenia and Pan are chaste, in opposition to the sensual, lustful relationships that Pan has enjoyed with mortal maenads.

A contrasting view of sexuality and desire is presented in *Sirena*. Lying in the sand-hollow made by Philoctetes’ body, Sirena delights in “his aura” that “envelops” her and that the “strange intimacy almost shocks” her (*Sirena*, 70). She “could scream with this delicious pain” when he touches

her scales, and she expresses her desire for him: "Need washes me, scours me raw" (*Sirena*, 95). When Sirena and Philoctetes consummate their love, Sirena's body "is a vessel filled with delight." She affirms that "love is a miracle. Lovemaking is a miracle. Philoctetes is a miracle" (*Sirena*, 108). Although sexuality is portrayed as a source of pleasure for Sirena, Napoli stresses, as she so often does, that love is also about relationship. Sirena describes how she and Philoctetes become close, as they take turns in telling stories. This sharing of stories is likened to a physical coming together. They "merge in storytelling" (*Sirena*, 98). They grow to understand one another, including the ways they differ, through word-play and debates. Sirena's participation in language games with Philoctetes can be seen as a contrast to the manipulative singing of mermaids.

As in Napoli's other novels, seduction is made visible and then rejected. Pan wishes to win Iphigenia's heart, not to seduce her by the music from his flute. In *Sirena*, seduction, of course, is made central to the power of mermaids, but from her first meeting with Philoctetes, Sirena fights against her urge to seduce Philoctetes through her singing. Her singing would, she knows, "bring his flesh to a frenzy of desire" (*Sirena*, 95).

I could seduce this man with a single song if I wanted. . . . I could sing and he would forget I was half fish. I could win immortality. Oh, the exquisite award this man unknowingly would give me. We could couple and part. And no one would be harmed. A cost-free prize of eternity. (*Sirena*, 83)

Sirena refuses to deliberately seduce Philoctetes, and when, unwittingly, she enchants him when she sings to ward off an attacking bear, she curses the song that brings her immortality.

In both novels, value is placed on an altruistic love. Pan makes clear that his love for Iphigenia is neither infatuation nor obsession. He rejects Apollo's concept that love is an absurdity and that intense love could not last an eternity. He rejects his father's advice that his love for Iphigenia is not worth it, for her love is like "a flicker of a candle" (*The Great God Pan*, 126). Pan's answer is that Iphigenia is worth his friendship, his protection, and his love. Iphigenia has been honest with him. She has made him see how others see him. His feelings and actions toward Iphigenia are expressed in terms of protection. In the first of three encounters with Iphigenia, Pan rescues her from a lynx and assures her that he is no rapist. Pan's love for Iphigenia is more akin to the Greek *agape*, a sacrificial love

in which he gives up self for the love of another. For Pan, to love truly is to be mortal. The exchange of a life for a life is dramatically conveyed in the last sentences of the novel: "My love is whisked away. The sword flashes, dazzles, as it falls" (*The Great God Pan*, 146).

In *Sirena*, too, love is equated with sacrifice. Sirena must make the most important decision that she will ever make when Philoctetes is pressed by Neoptolemus and Odysseus to go to Troy to avenge the death of his friend Achilles. As in so many of Napoli's novels, protagonists are faced with situations in which they grapple with the imperative of moral choice.

### Moral Choices

Pan and Sirena are presented as moral beings in stories based on myths in which there is much dishonesty, trickery, and deceit. In *The Great God Pan*, Napoli creates a Pan figure that incorporates aspects of the frolicsome, impulsive, panic-driven goat-god, but Pan reveals from the beginning of the novel that he abides by a code of ethics that sets him apart from the wanton cruelties of the god Apollo, or from the excesses of the god Dionysus. Pan shows remorse, for example, for his careless behavior in causing the drowning of the nymph Syrinx and makes his reed pipe in her honor. He shows respect for the life of a scorpion he has killed by risking his own life. He transforms into another scorpion so as to entice a female into mating and so procreate a life for the life he has taken, but he barely escapes—a transformational act that can be seen, perhaps, as a foreshadowing of, or preparation for, his later act of sacrifice. His decision to sacrifice himself is made in the context in which sacrifice is already the apex of the story. Iphigenia is willing to sacrifice herself so that Agamemnon's ships can sail for Troy and bring back her mother, Helen, so that her mother's shame can be ended. Nothing can stop her, for she cannot let her sister, Electra, die in her stead. Pan's decision to sacrifice his life for Iphigenia is not lightly undertaken. "Nothing is light for" him, he tells Artemis (*The Great God Pan*, 144).

Sirena's name is related lexically and functionally to the "sirens" in Homer's *Odyssey*, who "are enchanters of all mankind" and lure sailors to their destruction by their singing.<sup>7</sup> But Sirena is portrayed as a young person who develops a sense of moral outrage as she begins to understand how she and her sister mermaids are responsible for the drowning of inno-

cent men. In vivid scenes of wrecked ships and drowning sailors, Sirena, distraught, attempts to save lives. She rejects, at first, the hateful words hurled at her and her sisters: "Wretched misshapen monsters of the deep. Seductresses of evil" (*Sirena*, 14). She refuses to join the mermaids when they waylay more ships on the way to Troy. "We have become the monsters they said we were," she shouts, as she swims out to try to turn the doomed men back (*Sirena*, 36). She knows that she could not knowingly kill a man, for, then, how could she go on living, and she is willing to forgo an immortality that is based on an immoral act. She may be a "monster in body," but, she asserts, she is "decent in soul" (*Sirena*, 43).

Philoctetes' stories, Sirena notes, are all about honor. The story of Philoctetes itself is a story about honor and deceit. Sirena, watching from the sea, cannot believe that the men from the ship would actually leave the badly wounded Philoctetes on the beach of the island that no man visits because of its past. The women, Sirena explains, had risen against the men and murdered them. Her sister mermaids, she knows, would not have abandoned anyone of their community. "Shame on me," she chides herself when, afraid for herself, she first stays offshore (*Sirena*, 54). But, then, like Pan, Sirena takes action and intervenes to save a mortal from probable death.

Ten years later, Sirena overhears how Odysseus plans to win Philoctetes' assent to go to war by using Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, to trick Odysseus into letting go of the bow and arrows that are said to be necessary for the defeat of Trojan forces. She reasons that if she used her mermaid's power of song to keep Philoctetes, she would sing "with cunning and deceit" and would be "no better than the monster, Odysseus" (*Sirena*, 191). But in the Greek myths upon which Napoli's novels are based, and in the novels themselves, the question of how much agency protagonists have to make their own choices is a central one.

### The Power of the Gods

In *Disturbing the Universe*, Trites argues that young adult novels deal with how young adults negotiate with authority and power.<sup>8</sup> In the mythic worlds of *The Great God Pan* and *Sirena*, the power with which protagonists reckon is the power of the gods. Through the narratives of Pan and Sirena, Napoli positions readers to experience a world in which the palpable presence of the gods is believed to interfere and influence events. Pan, for example, suspects that Aphrodite must have lured Iphigenia to

the field where he meets her as she picks anemones, because she hopes that Pan will suffer by falling in love with a girl who will not love him back. The blood-red color of the flowers that Pan finds himself lying in is equated by Pan with the blood of the fawn killed by the lynx that was meant to kill Iphigenia. Napoli shows how events and their significances are chained together in Greek myth so that it appears that the gods are in control. The fawn belonged to Taugate, whom Artemis had changed into a deer to save her from being seduced by Heracles. The fault of the fawn's death was Iphigenia's, Artemis tells Pan, not his, because he was "powerless against the girl" (*The Great God Pan*, 40). It was Artemis who had demanded that Agamemnon sacrifice his fairest daughter.

In *Sirena*, mermaids are subject to the rules and mores of the mermaid community resided over by the authoritarian figure of Mother Dora, the daughter of Oceanus. In formal gatherings, she instructs the mermaids about their origins and the necessity of their gaining immortality, even though, as Sirena realizes, that immortality is achieved through immoral means. Sirena, toward the end of the novel, understands that she and her sister mermaids had listened to Mother Dora without thought. When luring sailors they "sang what Mother Dora told us to sing, grateful for the words, grateful for the permission not to think. An utter sham" (*Sirena*, 178). The implacability of gods who control life and death is made clear when Sirena's request that Philoctetes be granted immortality or, alternatively, that she be made mortal again is refused. She knows the rule, Mother Dora tells her. "A gift once bestowed by a god can never be taken away" (*Sirena*, 176).

Sirena also experiences the irresistible pressure of the gods to which humans are often subjected in Greek tragedy. Mother Dora attempts to persuade Sirena to leave Philoctetes by promising Sirena what she had long desired—namely, to "ride the turtle into the wide open ocean." Sirena wonders, "How much does she know? How much does she invade my mind as the aggressor, not the nurturer?" (*Sirena*, 178). The inevitability of Philoctetes' going to Troy is presented to Sirena in a meeting with nymphs, including Thetis, the mother of Achilles. Heracles, she is told, has been sent from Hades to persuade Philoctetes to do what is right. But, Mother Dora also opens up the possibility that Sirena has a choice, when she tells Sirena that she has to make a decision about letting Philoctetes leave. If she lets it happen, Philoctetes' wound will be cured by the skilled physician, Machaon.

### Individual Agency

“Contrary to a common misconception of what Greek tragedy is like, tragic myths do not simply illustrate the inevitability of ‘fate.’” Gods do subject human beings to “irresistible pressure,” but “these must be set against those where the preponderant dramatic meaning is borne by actions which are squarely the consequence of human choice.” Human choice is, thus, still an important element in Greek tragedy.<sup>9</sup> Pan and Sirena are both represented as struggling to attain individual agency in the interspaces between what the gods will to happen and what could happen. Pan decides, at times, “to stay away from the gods. All of them” (*The Great God Pan*, 56). He gains a measure of power over Apollo through his possession of “a way of knowing” that (as Apollo points out) can be equated with the power of a prophetic knowing. Through his ability to place himself in another’s situation, he is able to see through Apollo’s eyes, he tells the god. “And what perfidious eyes they are” (*The Great God Pan*, 101). Apollo’s perfidy extends to his cheating Pan in the music contest to which Pan had challenged him in order to win the heart of Iphigenia. When Hermes tells Pan the truth about Iphigenia’s sacrifice, Pan makes his decision. He is beholden to no one; he has the agency to make a deliberate choice. He can choose to be mortal and, thereby, save Iphigenia with Artemis’s help. Only in the acceptance and knowledge of his death does Pan free himself from the yoke of his hybrid body and from the yoke of the gods. It matters that he chooses to transform into a mortal goat for “the glory is that ordinary goat—not god—will bring the end I need” (*The Great God Pan*, 145).

Sirena is also described as possessing a streak of independence. She has a yen for adventure that marks her out from her sisters. These attributes help her when she makes the painful decision that she must alienate herself from her sisters when she can no longer conform to the mores of the mermaid community (*Sirena*, 43). She has her own perspective on what constitutes honor in the debates she has with Philoctetes over the exploits of Greek heroes. Sirena questions and deconstructs Philoctetes’ assumptions about honor in his stories about Greek heroes, using her own logic and a quick wit; and she questions and argues with Mother Dora and the nymphs over Philoctetes’ need to go to Troy. Philoctetes tells Sirena, in answer to her complaint that they are being manipulated, that this is not so if they do what they choose to do. Napoli’s story departs from Sophocles’ text, in which Heracles’ appearance is the deciding factor for Philoctetes’ decision to leave Lemnos. In Napoli’s novel, Philoctetes

tells Sirena that he will not go if she does not wish him to, even though Heracles himself came to him while he slept and told him that, with Neoptolemus, he “could bring fame and glory to Greece” (*Sirena*, 208). But Sirena knows that not going will kill him.

Buxton argues that some human choices in Greek tragedy can be categorized as “paradoxical” and gives the example of Agamemnon’s decision to sacrifice Iphigenia. Agamemnon, Buxton explains, “*put on the yoke-strap*; it was a freely chosen act. But the yoke-strap which he put on was that of *necessity*; he had no choice” (Buxton, 184). Sirena’s action, similarly, is in the spaces between necessity and choice. It is necessary that Philoctetes go to Troy, she has been told. He will kill the Trojan hero, Paris. Her free choice rests on the knowledge that she can let him go in the knowledge that he truly loves her.

The gods cannot break us apart—the gods cannot manipulate us—for nothing can affect a bond of true love. And it is within my power to stop Philoctetes from leaving—for love gives me that power. And it is within my power to release him from the duties of love. I choose the latter—not for vengeance or any mistaken sense of honor—but for the good of the man I love. (*Sirena*, 210)

Value is placed in both novels on altruistic love and love that is true. In these companion novels, Napoli’s hybrid protagonists are, in many ways, presented as mirror images of each other as they reckon with their love for mortals in the shadow of the gods. The gods in Napoli’s stories take on the role of “the framework or backdrop” that is ascribed to them in Greek tragedy. They are “that which is beyond and behind the action” (Buxton, 177). Napoli’s protagonists, Pan and Sirena, are the ones who make choices and sacrifices like mortal heroes and heroines in Greek tragedy.

Reviews of *The Great God Pan* acknowledge the vulnerability and psychological realism of a contemporary adolescent Pan figure along with some reservations about Napoli’s use of the classical myths inspiring her story. The question is raised, for example, whether Napoli’s novels stress romance rather than invoke the tragedy of the myths upon which she bases her novels.<sup>10</sup> Napoli’s deft integration of setting and various mythological figures into her story is noted by reviewers of both novels. *Sirena* was selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, 1999.

## NOTES

1. Donna Jo Napoli, personal interview, March 14, 2008.
2. *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. M. C. Howatson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 299–300.
3. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), ii, 95.
4. Sophocles, “Philoctetes,” <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/philoct.html> (accessed 2/21/2010).
5. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail to author, April 2, 2009.
6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 5.
7. Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999), xii, 39.
8. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 20. Hereafter referred to as Trites.
9. Richard Buxton, “Tragedy and Greek Myth,” *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 182. Hereafter referred to as Buxton.
10. For example, unsigned review of *The Great God Pan*, *Publisher's Weekly*, vol. 250, no. 21 (May 26, 2003), 71.



# Outsiders: *Song of the Magdalene, Breath, and Hush: An Irish Princess' Tale*

THE NOVELS *SONG OF THE MAGDALENE*, *Breath*, and *Hush: An Irish Princess' Tale* are drawn from the Bible, a German legend, and an Icelandic saga, respectively. In *Song of the Magdalene*, Napoli threads together selected episodes from the Bible that would seem to refer to Mary Magdalene, so as to construct a coherent narrative about the young woman, Miriam. Miriam's representation challenges traditional attitudes toward a biblical figure who has attracted much controversy. In *Breath*, Napoli draws upon a German legend for the basic framework of her story in which a piper is asked to get rid of the rats plaguing the town of Hameln. In Napoli's version, the boy, Salz, questions the beliefs, values, and reasoning of town officials and clergy as they deal with the disease. In *Hush*, as in *Bound*, Napoli writes about another female adolescent who is literally bound, but the binding, in this story, is the bondage of slavery. Napoli's source for *Hush* is the *Laxdæla Saga*, written about 1245 A.D., in which the kidnapping of Melkorka, an Irish princess, by slavers is a pivotal element of the story. Napoli reworks the narrative forms of her sources and incorporates into her texts contradictions among belief systems, cultural practices, and values as they impact her adolescent protagonists, who are treated as outcasts.

In "Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories," Napoli speaks about *Song of the Magdalene* as an example of how she uses the concept of the outsider in her novels. She situates "true outsiders . . . in the very center of [her] story—where the reader must face them."<sup>1</sup> Napoli speaks of outsiders as a way of "seducing" her readers "into caring enough about the

true outsiders to walk around in their skin, with their flesh and bones, for a while" (Napoli, 2). She speaks of Miriam and Abraham in *Song of the Magdalene* as examples of "ultimate outsiders," explaining that they "are like those around them in their heart and soul and mind, but their bodies render them different" (Napoli, 8). Miriam has epilepsy and has the first of seven fits at the age of ten, and Abraham has cerebral palsy. They are marked as outsiders in a cultural and societal context in which infirmity is associated with possession by devils. The boy, Salz, in *Breath* is considered, in this chapter, as another example of an ultimate outsider. Salz, as Napoli explains in her postscript, is afflicted with what is known today as cystic fibrosis (*Breath*, 257). Caught between competing discourses of Catholicism and paganism, Salz is suspected of being a warlock in a thirteenth-century German community. In *Hush*, Melkorka, another outsider, is a slave on the margins of society: Her rights are nonexistent. In all three novels, adolescent protagonists challenge those who seek to oppress their dignity and selfhood.

### SONG OF THE MAGDALENE

Napoli imagines the life of Mary Magdalene, prior and up to her first meeting with Jesus. Through her portrayal of Miriam, Napoli is following in the steps of scholars who have questioned the interpretation of Mary Magdalene as a sinner and prostitute. The popular image of Mary Magdalene has been one that has equated "feminine beauty" with "sexuality and sin."<sup>2</sup> New scholarship about women in the Gospels suggests that this reputation was partly based on an association made between Mary Magdalene's "seven devils" and female sin by early Christian writers, and partly based on a conflation of various Marys in the Bible, "some of whom are explicitly described as sinners." Biased interpretations and prejudice have transformed the character of a woman who, Susan Haskins argues, was a "chief female disciple" of Jesus (Haskins, 15).

Napoli explains in an epilogue to her novel that she "worked backward, starting with every biblical episode" that she "could find that might possibly involve Mary Magdalene," and then created "for her a history that would prepare her for and help make sense of the actions she takes in the New Testament." It was a "challenging task" because of the presence of "several Marys in the early New Testament" (*Song*, n.p.). Napoli's story

offers a fictional explanation for Mary Magdalene's misrepresentation by showing how her strong-minded character, Miriam, who frequently defies the hypocritical conventions of her community, is perceived as a whore after she is raped. Some reviewers argue that Napoli depicts a biblical woman with "modern sensibilities."<sup>3</sup> However, Napoli shows through her story how a young woman, like Miriam, could be well aware of the hypocritical attitudes of her time. By undermining the premise that Mary Magdalene was a sinner, Napoli illustrates the point made by Haskins that the "true Mary Magdalene has much to offer when freed from the restrictions which gender bias has imposed upon her" (Haskins, 399). Napoli's view is that Mary Magdalene had to be "quite a feminist—she just had to be," because she "was doing things that other women" were not doing. "The reason that she is thought of as a prostitute is that she was a woman with money," but she could have acquired "money of her own in other ways." Mary Magdalene, Napoli says, did not "have to be the prostitute that we say she was," and there is no "evidence in any of the New Testament" to indicate that she was.<sup>4</sup>

### Miriam

Miriam's story takes place in Magdala in the first century during a period of political and religious instability. There is dissatisfaction over the burdening taxation of Jews in Galilee for a new palace for Herod Antipas. Later in the novel, the talk is of Jewish rebellion against Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Palestine who disrespected the Jewish religion. There are reports of the Roman massacre of Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem. Scenes in which Miriam is a firsthand witness to the baptizing of prostitutes and others by Jochanan in the Jordan sets the context for Miriam's changed life toward the end of the novel.

At the beginning of Napoli's story, ten-year-old Miriam, who lives with her widowed father, Hannah, and Hannah's crippled son, Abraham, describes how her "first fit came out of the blue, out of the blue, blue sky" (*Song*, 1). She is alone in her father's valley and singing, when she sees a dazzling light and collapses. As Miriam recovers from the fit, she knows what had caused it: "Everyone knew." It was caused by a "personal demon" inside of her body (*Song*, 11). She is convinced that she is impure but cannot go to the mikvah to be cleansed without people wondering why she needs to be purified. Even as a child, Miriam is aware that she must

guard against anyone knowing about her fits. She would “join the outcasts of society” (*Song*, 15). As Napoli points out in “Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories,” if Miriam tells anyone about her “seizure, she will never marry—never have children. She will be cast out of the most important parts of her life, from her perspective” (Napoli, 6).

The hypocrisy of a culture that associates the infirm with evil and devilry is reinforced through the character of Hannah’s son, Abraham. Unable to walk, Abraham’s crippled body marks him as an outcast, and he is kept away from others by his mother so that they would not need to fear his “demon” (*Song*, 23). The knowledge of Abraham’s intelligence and learning is kept within the household. They are also hidden by his mask of idiocy. “My only hope,” he tells Miriam, “is that they do not see me as a person. Then they will not need to banish me” (*Song*, 126). Abraham challenges the commonly held belief associating devils with sickness. As a witness to one of Miriam’s fits, he laughs at the idea of demons; he and Miriam have not broken any religious laws as set out in the Torah. He tells her, “If there’s anything I’ve figured out in my life, it’s that invalids aren’t any more sinners than anyone else” (*Song*, 55). Miriam’s continued silence about her fits, despite her wish to disabuse people of their fears, makes clear how deeply the association between sin, devils, and the disabled is entrenched in the culture’s, and therefore, in Miriam’s, construction of reality. She still wonders whether there is a demon living inside her. At the beginning of the novel, Miriam is represented as a lively, happy child (akin to the young girl Zel) whose feet are perpetually dancing. She declares her love for the color purple because it is “the sign of power” (*Song*, 1). But, after her first fit, some of this joy disappears as she decides that she must atone for her sins by giving up dancing and wearing the bright colors she enjoys.

### **Breaking the Unwritten Law**

Napoli inscribes within her story the restrictions placed on the women in Magdala. In “Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories,” Napoli refers to Miriam’s act of going alone to her father’s valley, which “marks her as different, since girls didn’t go alone, and she does it furtively” (Napoli, 5). Miriam demonstrates throughout the novel that she will not be bound by social and cultural conventions, as she also begins to take Abraham in his handcart, at his request, to the valley and push him through the streets of Magdala. Miriam notes that “no other decent woman walked freely through

the streets, going wherever she wanted with no fixed purpose" (*Song*, 66). As a couple, she and Abraham are regarded and treated as outsiders as they walk along the margins of society beside prostitutes and beggars.

As in *Bound and Daughter of Venice*, the character of the enlightened father is used by Napoli in stories in which daughters push at the boundaries of societal and cultural mores. Miriam's liberty is shown to be dependent on her father, a wealthy merchant who is represented as unusually liberal for the time. Her father allows her freedoms denied to other daughters. He had disregarded social mores of the community by taking Miriam's mother, who had resisted the traditional role of keeping house, with him on his journeys. Her body lay under the "terebinth tree" on their land; and Miriam notes that some women regarded the burial place as a "scandal" (*Song*, 74). He had, also, incurred the disapprobation of the community by taking Hannah and her crippled son into his household.

However, while Miriam's father does not forbid her excursions with Abraham, he does insist that Miriam protect herself by obeying certain customs, such as wearing a veil in public and keeping her hair hidden. The hostility of the community is made evident when Miriam and Abraham are driven from the carpenter's shop because Abraham asks Miriam to speak out about a fault in the measurement of a board. Jacob, the carpenter, complains to Miriam's father that Magdala is "not a town for idiots and cripples. Listen to our leaders" (*Song*, 81). He tells Miriam's father that "it's everyone's concern when you don't live like the rest of us" (*Song*, 82). Miriam berates herself for fleeing from Jacob's shop. She had fled in silence. She had "failed" herself (*Song*, 79). Next time, she promises herself, she "would not be silenced" (*Song*, 80).

### **The Power of Voice: Miriam's Song**

The emphasis on women's relationship to the power of language found in *Beast* and *Hush* is also an important aspect of the story in *Song of the Magdalene*. Miriam and the other women in Magdala are denied access to the written word, including the Torah, whose sacred laws they are asked to obey. Nevertheless, as the novel's title indicates, despite being cast as an outsider, Miriam's strength and agency are heard through her powerful voice—especially through the songs she sings. The words of her favorite canticle, "The Song of Songs," reverberate through Napoli's story. At the beginning of the novel, Miriam happily sings a "mixed-up version of a song

about fawns” from a scroll the family owns (*Song*, 9). Because she cannot read she does not know the actual words. Like the other women in the village, she receives her knowledge, as do the servants and laborers, from the men who are given the charge of the Torah. It is Abraham who offers to teach Miriam to read. Miriam, who has also heard of women reading outside Magdala, soon announces, joyfully, that she is “a girl child who would read” (*Song*, 38). Abraham tells her later that while religious laws do not forbid women to read, it is the “unwritten laws” in Magdala that are important—laws that are enforced “through shame and isolation” (*Song*, 108).

A key episode in the novel is thirteen-year-old Miriam’s decision to take Abraham with her to the house of prayer to hear the Levites sing the canticles she so loves. As she listens to the prayers, she is made aware of the ideology inscribed into the scriptures that constructs women as less valued than men: “*Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe . . . who hast not made me a woman*” (*Song*, 98). Her concentration broken, Miriam mulls over the words: “The Creator had made me a woman. Should I be sad? Were all these women sad? Did they know something I didn’t know?” (*Song*, 99). The silencing of women’s voices in the house of prayer is evident as Miriam sings the canticle she most loves, “The Song of Songs,” alongside the Levites, until only her voice is heard. Aware of the hostility she has generated, she determines to sing on, determined to make her voice heard. “This was my voice and I had promised myself that I would use it” (*Song*, 102). Miriam and Abraham, stigmatized further by their unwelcome presence, are literally swept outside.

Miriam’s spirit is not squelched. She continues to draw strength from reading stories in the “scriptures” about heroines such as Deborah and Jael. Miriam wishes she could be like her namesake: “A woman prophet. A woman with a voice that would be heard. A woman who sang a war victory song” (*Song*, 131). Napoli shows how Miriam, subjected to informal laws that are used to subjugate and silence women, is able, at the same time, to make use of stories and a language that speak about the power of women for her own empowerment. Miriam voices, too, her love for Abraham, by drawing upon the sensual language of the “The Song of Songs.”

### **Cast Out**

As she and Abraham wander the streets, Miriam thinks how different they are from other couples. When Abraham is sick, sixteen-year-old Miriam is

constantly at his side despite Hannah's concerns regarding their new relationship. Abraham and Miriam become lovers under the tacit but unspoken agreement of the family, which now includes Judith, whom her father marries. A widow and barren, Judith categorizes herself as a "misfit" (*Song*, 122). She tells Miriam that she does not care what Miriam does at home, but she must behave appropriately outside. The household becomes an inner sanctuary for Abraham and Miriam, who is pregnant when Abraham dies. The loving connections among Hannah, Judith, and Miriam, who weave baby gowns and make preparations for the birth, attest to the importance of family bonds, a theme embedded in many of Napoli's novels.

Her downfall, Miriam narrates, is caused by her determination to see the boy described as an idiot, whom she found with a group of beggars near the hall of prostitutes (*Song*, 159). Reaching out to talk to and touch the boy, she is seen by Jacob, the carpenter, who accuses her of seducing yet another idiot boy, seizes her, throws her to the ground, and rapes her as she has another fit. Awakened by pain, Miriam is lying naked on the floor surrounded by Jewish coins. She is helped by a prostitute when the blood comes, and she loses her son. He is perfect, she notes as she holds him in the cup of her hand: "Even in death, so tiny, I could see that he would have been a tower of a man" (*Song*, 168). Unmarried and raped, Miriam is now a pariah, linked with the prostitute who helps her home. The woman, Miriam admits, is one whom she would have formerly avoided. Miriam reflects on how she must have looked that day as she attempts to see how she must have appeared to others. She realized that she must have appeared in disarray and wild with her hair loosened from her veil, a spectacle that would have reinforced her image as "other," rather than as a respected and respectable woman of Israel. She will no longer be safe in Magdala, her father tells her. Jacob will go unpunished, for it is she who will be blamed for inviting the attack by appearing in public. She will be regarded as a "woman whose lusts revealed her as a consort of the devil" (*Song*, 171).

Forced to leave her family, who can no longer protect her, Miriam is taken in by her mother's family in Dor, where she performs the role of a servant for two years. She loses her will to sing and conducts herself as a "proper woman" (*Song*, 194). Upon hearing reports of the Jewish revolt against the Romans, she dreams of her "personal revolt" and of going to Jerusalem where she will be unveiled and unafraid (*Song*, 193). A sixth fit, which causes her relatives to view her as possessed by devils, provides her

with the excuse to leave. She travels first to see Jochanan, who preaches to the despised, including prostitutes. Miriam is intrigued by the fact that there is a preacher who understands, as she does, that any woman who is alone and unsupported could turn to prostitution unless offered community protection. Napoli includes an incident in her story that illustrates how easily a woman, such as Mary Magdalene, could be identified as a prostitute in Biblical times. When Miriam leaves and travels alone in the wilderness, she, too, is assumed to be a prostitute. She is perceived by those who offer her shelter as an independent woman traveling by herself who must, therefore, be engaged in prostitution.

### **A Woman without Sin**

Crossing the wilderness, where she sings for the first time since her son's death, Miriam reaches the River Jordan where Jochanan offers purification for sinners. Miriam is unable to follow the naked women she sees swimming in the water, who move in time to men's chants while watched by the men on the bank. She notes the women's silence and their separateness, and she vows that she will not be baptized in this way if it means keeping her songs locked within her. Miriam now challenges the ideology to which she once adhered, that women are naturally unclean and are in need of purification. Taking responsibility for her own spiritual and moral growth, she travels to the caves of Qumran, which have long held a place in her imagination as a place of refuge, where she worships her God alone. Disregarding the protocol expected of an orthodox Jewish woman, she helps a young Roman woman—a non-Jew—who is carrying her sick daughter to Galilee to seek the help of the healer known as Joshua. Realizing that all that had happened to her had prepared her for this journey, Miriam travels with them to Magdala where Jesus is teaching. Recognized by the local women as a whore and an evil woman, Miriam is chased by an unruly crowd and experiences her seventh fit. She is rescued by Joshua, who takes her by the hand and tells the crowd that "this woman has no devils within her. Not seven, not one. None" (*Song*, 240). The association between devilry and sin is broken: Miriam has no need of repentance.

Napoli explains in "Fairy Tales, Myths, and Religious Stories" that "Miriam, through harsh testing of her stamina and beliefs, comes to recognize her own strength and goes to help the great teacher of her own times, Joshua, the Jew that the Romans called Jesus" (Napoli, 8). Ilene Cooper

suggests that Napoli's novel "demands a reader who can both comprehend philosophical ideas and appreciate nuance to truly recognize all the story has to offer."<sup>5</sup> *Song of the Magdalene* was selected as a 1997 ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

### *BREATH*

In *Breath*, also, Napoli deals with issues that involve readers in thinking critically about how hypocrisy and prejudice are embedded in beliefs that are held and practiced by a specific community. As she does in *The Magic Circle*, but in a different context, Napoli explores the relationship between religion and witchcraft in a medieval world.

In writing *Breath*, Napoli uses the kernel of a well-known legend of Hameln, retold by the Brothers Grimm and popularized in Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper," in which a piper is paid to rid the town of Hameln of rats. When the town refuses him the guilders he was promised, he leads the town's children away to the mountains where a "wondrous portal opened wide, As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed."<sup>6</sup> Napoli makes extensive changes both in narrative form and in content. Replacing the anonymous narrator of both legend and poem is the first-person narration of twelve-year-old Salz, who takes the place of the lame boy who, according to the legend, is left behind by the piper. In an interview, Napoli explains that the oldest version she could find was a short German version that mentions a boy who watches but is too ill to accompany the children following the piper. Although English versions made references to a lame boy, there seemed nothing in the German version that prevented her from choosing a protagonist with cystic fibrosis. Her knowledge of the disease is based on the experience of knowing a girl with the disease who was dying. She wanted, Napoli continues, "to make my reader understand what it's like to live with such pain and with everyone assuming you will die soon."<sup>7</sup> Salz's pain is conveyed to readers through his constant coughing and his need to stand on his hands to clear the mucus in his lungs. As one reviewer points out, the "real story is about Salz, the way he copes with his illness, and his struggle to overcome the superstitions of his day and replace them with the logic of ecclesiastical enlightenment."<sup>8</sup> The piper, the chief character in the Grimm tale and Browning's narrative poem, is, therefore, not at the forefront of Napoli's story, although he serves the

same function in Napoli's story as in the Grimm and Browning versions. He is represented as a somewhat ambiguous character—a traveling piper rather than a rat catcher—a worldly and quick-thinking man who shows off his wit, dancing, and tumbling skills to Salz.

Napoli also changes the content of the legend's storyline by incorporating into her plot one of the explanations of what happened in Hameln in 1284—namely, the growth of an ergot fungus on the grain because of an unusual rainy season. The infected grain was subsequently used in bread and beer. It was an explanation she found interesting as it had been used in the condemnation of women as witches in Salem. Hameln had had several outbreaks of ergot poisoning over time (Napoli, *DownHomeBooks*, 16). In her postscript to the novel, Napoli provides information about connections made between rats and the plague, which explains why rats were first suspected of causing the disease in Hameln, and she provides details of the effects of ergot poisoning. In medieval Germany, where large quantities of bread and beer were consumed, the fungus caused both physical and “temporary to permanent insanity” (*Breath*, 259). Salz tells about this terrible period in Hameln during which he is suspected of heresy and of being a warlock.

### **Salz: Hameln 1284**

Set apart because of his disability, Salz is an intelligent boy with a love of learning. Once a month he travels by boat to the nearby town of Hörter, where he studies at the monastery with Pater Frederick. Interwoven through Salz's narrative are the results of his learning, which include details of the geography and history of the area where he lives plus works of theology that he has studied. When he meets the well-traveled piper, Salz, anxious to prove that he is learned, tells him that he has read “the letters of the Benedictine nun Elisabeth von Schönau,” who had criticized church corruption (*Breath*, 11). Under Pater Frederick, Salz is taught that “man is a moral being, endowed with reason” (*Breath*, 44), and Salz acknowledges that Pater Frederick “strives most to teach me logical, moral reasoning” (*Breath*, 45).

### **Religion and Paganism**

As in *Beast*, Napoli shows how traditional beliefs and practices can continue to co-exist with a more dominant religious belief and teaching. At the

beginning of the novel, Salz tells the “Christian piper” that his grandmother is a member of a “coven” and opines that Christianity and paganism can exist side by side: “We’re papists in our coven—we follow the pope. We practice the good magic of the old religion, merging it with the enlightenment of the new religion. . . . We are soldiers of Christ” (*Breath*, 14–15). The priests come to the coven when things go wrong, Salz tells the piper, who, in turn, tells Salz that he risks his soul. Salz has also been influenced by his local priest, Pater Michael, who, functioning as an oppositional figure to Pater Frederick, is immersed in a double discourse, as he straddles the ideological divide between belief in the supernatural and belief in Catholicism by condoning pagan practices that have been forbidden by the Church. In a harrowing scene, Pater Michael officiates at a pagan ceremony in which a live cow is buried alive as a sacrifice in the belief that this will bring an end to the disease that is causing the death of cattle and other animals. In answer to Salz’s horror and criticism of what has been done, Pater Michael refers to the “*mysterium* of this cow’s life and death,” a term he uses in conjunction with the word *mirabiliae* to describe the coven’s practices. The hypocrisy of the priest in misapplying the language of religion in reference to a pagan ceremony is noted by Salz: “Miracles are allowed; magic is not” (*Breath*, 106). When challenged by Salz to give a reason for his failure to denounce the practices of the coven, Pater Michael provides three examples, each with chapter and verse from the Old or New Testament, in which reference is made to the use of magic. He puts Salz to the test when he asks whether Salz has more “faith in oil and wax from the tomb of a saint” than in the practice of the supernatural (*Breath*, 109).

Superstitious belief continues to be important in how Salz and the Hameln community perceive their world. Salz knows that he can ward off the devil with puns. He weaves “goblin crosses” to hang on the door to keep evil away (*Breath*, 30); he keeps a toad, then a kitten, as his familiar, and his grandmother engages in activities that blend herbal healing with pagan practices that are partly masked by a veneer of Christianity. Salz, despite his criticism of Pater Michael, is swept up into the hemlock-induced obscene frenzy of the coven after the live burial of the cow, in which all questions “of theology are forgotten” (*Breath*, 109). Salz is shown in the novel to be placed at the site of two contradictory ways of experiencing his world. He is, as he says, “conflicted.”

Whenever I think of the inconsistencies in Pater Michael, of the weaknesses of this leader of my church, I resolve to take the matter into my

own hands and beg the coven to cease certain practices. But I never do, for that's when the sensation of flying comes back, interrupting rudely, banishing all semblance of logic. (*Breath*, 115)

Napoli presents a community overtaken by hysteria and fear of witchcraft as Hameln's population of humans and animals is affected by the ergot poisoning. Salz describes scenes of disorder and madness in which his father and elder brothers are consumed by idiocy and violence after drinking beer from the new grain. The ultimate act of violence is the murder of Salz's grandmother by Bertram, his eldest brother, as she tries to persuade Bertram that Salz's coughing is not a sign of contagious disease but a sign of the illness from which he has always suffered. He had meant to kill Salz himself, Bertram insists at his trial. He had been instructed by Saint Michael to kill him so as to prevent Salz's spreading the "rat illness" (*Breath*, 192). The judge's discourse of law and his use of the teaching of Jesus are embodied in his statements that "Christ also preaches that we embrace the sick," and that "fear of the sick is rooted in pagan heresy" (*Breath*, 196). But the appearance of Salz's cat begets a language of witchcraft: familiar, witch, warlock, coven, heresy. Salz is saved by Pater Michael and Pater Frederick, who demonstrate, by having him strip naked, that Salz is clear of the known symptoms of rat disease and that Salz's cough is part of the illness he has had all his life. "Let the argument win. Let the principle of order prevail," thinks Salz. But, Salz, represented as a clear thinker, knows that there is "lack of reason" and "order" in Pater Frederick's argument (*Breath*, 206).

### The Power of Reason

Napoli sets up in her text the opposition of chaos and disorder versus rationality and order. Value is placed on the latter through Salz's ability to recognize his brother's twisted reasoning and his criticism of the corruption of "ordinary thought" (*Breath*, 193). By the end of the novel, he determines that "evil is—the lack of rationality" (*Breath*, 252); and he asserts his belief in the importance of finding "order somewhere in the world" (*Breath*, 254). Emphasis is placed on the role of logic as Salz goes through a step-by-step process of analysis and elimination as he thinks through what is causing the disease that is destroying the animals and citizens of Hameln. His explanations for what is causing the madness that

overtakes his family at night move from the superstitious to realistic thinking about their household habits. He eventually comes to the conclusion that the problem must lie in the new season's beer, but he abandons this hypothesis for one that is publicly accepted: the link made between the omnipresent rats and disease. He makes the connection that it is the new grain in the bread and beer that is causing their affliction only when he sees that scenes of death, disorder, and insanity in the market square continue, even after the piper has piped away the rats and the children. He becomes ill after eating, for the first time, the new bread. The rich were afflicted before the poor because of their prior consumption of the fresh grain. He had also remained untouched because of his grandmother's advice that he should drink cider, not beer, because of his condition. Although Salz is represented as thinking out of the box, he does not make all the connections. For example, he fails to connect the new grain with the colored fungus he had seen the cows eating—long before the grain was harvested. Napoli admits in her notes to readers that "Salz, our scholar of reason, almost figures this out—going against the modes of thought of his time and place, applying reason of a later age" (*Breath*, 260).

Cart writes that Napoli's "medieval setting," described through Salz's eyes as a "world of ignorance, superstition, and cruelty," is more akin to the painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder on the jacket of the hardcover than to Browning's poem.<sup>9</sup> Napoli certainly does not indulge in sentimentality in her novels. The motherless Salz has lost three younger sisters—two of whom were sold into slavery. Then he loses his grandmother, who has nurtured and protected him, when she is mortally injured during Bertrand's attack on Salz. In answer to an interview question asking Napoli why Salz's grandmother had to die, Napoli emphasizes, as she does elsewhere, that to spare characters when all around people are dying is "emotionally false" (Napoli, DownHomeBooks, 19). Napoli affirms, however, that her outsiders "do not grow embittered or wither" (Napoli, 8). For example, Napoli sees Salz retaining "a belief in God" that will sustain him, although he has "rejected a corrupt church" (Napoli, DownHomeBooks, 19). *Breath* was awarded a Golden Kite Honor Book Award in 2003 and was selected as a 2004 ALA Best Book for Young Adults. Napoli, as stated in chapter 1, defines herself as a secular humanist. Humanist values of hope and compassion, agency and survival, together with the value placed on the power of language, are embedded in stories in *Song of the Magdalene*, *Breath*, and *Hush: An Irish Princess' Tale*.

### *AN IRISH PRINCESS*

In *Hush*, the power of myth and storytelling is also recognized for maintaining and strengthening a cultural heritage. Using as her source the “Icelandic Saga of the People of Laxardale,” Napoli writes a compelling story about Melkorka, daughter of the king of Downpatrick, who is kidnapped by a Russian slave trader. She is sold to an Icelandic chief, Hoskuld, who takes her back with him—a young woman in bondage—to Iceland where she bears a son. Napoli reworks the anonymous narrative of an Icelandic saga that records the history of Hoskuld’s purchase and the subsequent life of Hoskuld and his sons in that Melkorka records, in her own voice, the impact of the immoral and unethical practice of slavery. Napoli explains in an author’s note that she constructed a past for Melkorka “that is founded on general facts about life in Ireland, Russia, and Scandinavia in the early 900s, trying to find out what she must have feared and hoped through her journeys” (*Hush*, n.p.). At the beginning of the novel, fifteen-year-old Melkorka recounts how, during a family outing to the Norse town of Dublin, her thirteen-year-old brother’s hand is severed from his arm by a drunken Norse youth. Her father plans for revenge against the Norseman, Bjarni, who outrages Melkorka’s family by offering jewels in compensation and by asking for Melkorka’s hand in marriage. Melkorka and her eight-year-old sister, Brigid, disguised as peasant youths, are told by their mother to ride away from their home to a ring fort until it is safe to return. Spotted by a slave merchant as they ride along a coastal path, they are ambushed and taken aboard a slave ship as captives.

#### **Melkorka in Bondage**

Napoli sets her novel during a time when Vikings were plundering the monasteries of Eire and snatching men, women, and children from coastal paths and fields to foster a thriving slave trade. Melkorka’s life in captivity is placed within the context of a slave culture that stretched across Northern Europe to the Baltic and the Black Seas. As Melkorka admits at the beginning of the book, she is no stranger to slavery; her father owned slaves, as did many others. Napoli presents post-colonial perspectives on what it means to be oppressed and regarded as “other” through Melkorka, who, as a member of a ruling hierarchy, sees peasants and slaves as inferior to herself and her family. She is of the opinion that

slaves, in particular, are ignorant and unintelligent, and she is not swayed by the opposing views of her sister, Brigid, who argues that, in terms of intelligence, they are much the same as everyone else. Melkorka notes that the Norse own slaves from all over the world without being hassled by their local abbot, who preaches against slavery. Integrated into the text are the anti-slavery view of the abbot and the opposing view of Melkorka's father, who argues that slavery is woven into Irish society and enriches the population, including the Church. Melkorka may state that she is unsure about where she stands in relation to slavery, but her disdainful words and attitude signal that she does not censure slavery either. Her view of slaves and peasants persists even after she and Bridget are captured by the Russian slave trader, Clay Man, named, Melkorka discovers later, because of the clay weights he uses in trading slaves. When Melkorka sees a woman yelling and biting the hand of a member of the crew who is offering her food, thus forgoing the single parsnip and beer handed out to her, she thinks that the "peasant woman must be crazy" (*Hush*, 99). She labels her "Crazy Woman," making the commonly held negative association between a woman's rebelliousness and insanity (*Hush*, 103).

Forcibly dislocated from all she has known, Melkorka is subjected to the power of others. Once she had deemed it unseemly to sit at the same table as a slave. On board the slave ship, she is one of those who live on the margins of society, gagged, bound, and humiliated by a brutal crew. She is now subjected to the insults she had once flung at slaves: "Ugly, stupid, clumsy, fool, coward, thief. Everyone hates *prælar*," she is told by a fellow slave (*Hush*, 191). Napoli inserts details about a ubiquitous slave culture as Melkorka learns that slaves' lives are of no account, that slaves are murdered or even sacrificed when convenient, that slaves have no legal rights. As her journey into slavery continues, Melkorka's subjectivity, shaped by identification with royalty within a dominant hierarchical tribal system, is transformed as she begins to identify with her fellow sufferers. Her "journey," as one reviewer notes, "becomes intellectual as well as geographical."<sup>10</sup>

As in all her novels, Napoli provides myriad viewpoints. For example, Napoli invites readers to think about how slavery could co-exist with Christianity. In Miklagard, as Maeve's children are sold away from her, Melkorka is sure that the Northern Europeans who stand watching the transactions will intervene. "They should protest," she thinks, "object that slavery is a blot on mankind" (*Hush*, 175). Melkorka's changed attitude

toward slavery is evident: Now, she would free slaves. She hears meanings assigned to concepts such as honor that are antithetical to Irish ways of thinking. On Hoskuld's ship, she hears the Vikings' derogatory views of the Irish. From the day she is captured, she endures and witnesses the degradation of women slaves.

### Sexual Oppression

Melkorka's narrative particularly addresses slavery from a woman's perspective. It is mostly unprotected children and women who are kidnapped from their homelands by the slave traders. Melkorka sees women raped and witnesses the tearing away of children from their mothers when they are sold separately. When the woman she has labeled "Weeping Woman" is gang-raped, Melkorka now understands that the woman she had labeled as "crazy" was protecting herself and her children. As Melkorka looks into the eyes of Crazy Woman, whom she comes to know as Maeve, she sees her "iron will" (*Hush*, 116). Weeks later, in the northern lands, Melkorka realizes, when Clay Man prevents one of his workers from sexually assaulting one of the girls, that she and the other young, pretty, slave girls are being kept for a purpose. They will fetch a higher price as virgins.

Melkorka had already found a symbol of her captivity on a carved cross that bore the same symbol as a brooch she had admired in a Norse craftsman's shop in Dublin. Her changed interpretation of the decoration on the brooch and cross symbolizes the changes in Melkorka's status. As a free princess she had thought that the animal depicted in the metalwork was surrounded by curling "tendrils" whose "spirals caress[ed] the dear one. Almost like tongues" (*Hush*, 9). Now, a *praell*, Melkorka sees the animal trapped by "vipers" not "vines" as she had thought. "They circle, ready for the kill" (*Hush*, 189). When Hoskuld offers her a brooch looted from Ireland, Melkorka feels that "a circle closes around me, locking me in place" (*Hush*, 256).

Hoskuld, rich and powerful, tells her owner that he is looking for the "right kind of woman" (*Hush*, 210). He refuses to be thwarted by Clay Man's reluctance to sell Melkorka, and she becomes Hoskuld's concubine. In the chapter entitled "Dered—M—Betho"—"the end of the world"—Melkorka gives voice to her emotions as Hoskuld takes possession of her body. She feels unclean, "shattered." She has "been eradicated *tri drochgnimu*—through evil deeds" (*Hush*, 223). In the weeks that fol-

low, a delicate relationship is built between Hoskuld and Melkorka. She recognizes his good leadership and his surprising goodwill toward his *prælar* when they perform well. She acknowledges that he can be tender and appreciates his praise when she has shown initiative in helping save his ship during a violent storm. Hoskuld, for his part, is shown to worship his “Beauty,” as he calls her (*Hush*, 301). But he also makes clear to her that he will not brook signs of rebellion from her when he is brutal with *prælar* who express fear of the sea.

The relationship between Hoskuld and Melkorka is based on a colonial concept of possession that includes ownership of women’s bodies. He will always keep her with him, Hoskuld tells Melkorka. She will be his “most important *praell*,” his “greatest treasure” (*Hush*, 301). Napoli shows how Hoskuld is unable to think outside an ideological culture of slavery within which he lives and works. Although he shows his love for her, he cannot free her, for he will risk losing her. “This is the way the world is,” he tells her (*Hush*, 302). Melkorka, although sad, will not allow herself to feel or show tenderness toward Hoskuld for she can no more “accept what is” than he can “change” things (*Hush*, 303). As in the original saga, Melkorka carries Hoskuld’s child. Although she has refused to identify with the subjectivity constructed for her by Hoskuld, her attitude toward him has changed. He is no longer the stranger she had hated. However, Melkorka is represented as keeping her dignity and selfhood by practicing resistance—using the only weapon available to her, her silence.

### Silence as Resistance

The silencing of women’s voices is most often associated with the repression of female voices, as in *Song of the Magdalene*. The title of *Hush* emphasizes the importance Napoli assigns to the concept of voice and the role that silencing plays in women’s lives. Napoli plays with the word *hush* in the text in various ways, showing how silence can be used to repress women, but also how it can be used by women to resist oppression. Melkorka is told to hush by her mother on more than one occasion. Melkorka must learn, her mother tells her, “when to hush” (*Hush*, 25). Once she is on the slave ship, Melkorka is literally forced to hold her tongue when she and the other captives are gagged for long periods of time. In following the lead of Brigid, who emits not so much as a groan and refuses to look at or speak to her, Melkorka determines she will not speak either, for “silence

is also part of our deception because our language would give us away as being from the same place" (*Hush*, 100). The point is made in one review that Melkorka's first-person narrative, by revealing the innermost thoughts and feelings that "she refuses to utter," constructs "an intimate bond between the reader and the protagonist, as [readers] are the only ones who truly know her soul: all of the other slaves and captors see only glimpses of her desires, fears, and changes."<sup>11</sup>

Melkorka uses silence to resist her captors throughout her captivity as a slave on the ship. "Hush," narrates Melkorka, "has become my internal chant. It drums in Mother's voice like a heart-beat" (*Hush*, 137). She retains silence as Clay Man attempts to break her by forcing her to speak; she endures his effort to starve her by withholding fish and beer until she is so weak he is afraid she will die. "It's over," she narrates; she "has won" (*Hush*, 151). Melkorka draws strength for her silence from Crazy Woman, who tells Melkorka that silence will be her salvation. She has "very little power," Melkorka realizes, but the power she does have "comes from her silence" (*Hush*, 153). It is a power that is linked closely to the power of language conveyed through storytelling.

### The Power of Story

Napoli retains the important role of stories and storytelling as integral elements of a story based on a saga. A *fil*—poet—and a *seanchai*—storyteller—for example, are invited to Melkorka's home to celebrate the recovery of Nuada from his mutilation. Onboard the slave ship, Maeve proves to be an accomplished storyteller as she adapts the Irish tale about the combat between "Cúchulain and Ferdie" to a literally captive audience. The art of a storyteller, who wishes her words to take on life in the imagination of their listeners, is heard in Maeve's exhortation: "Let your eyes follow my words and paint them" (*Hush*, 120). Maeve disguises the tale to confuse the crew, but when she reaches the part of the tale that tells of the ford combat, her words resonate: "Strong arms count in the water . . . Strong, strong arms" (*Hush*, 124). Brigid, faster than Melkorka, runs and dives into the icy waters of the river followed by a Saxon youth.

The power story has over the imagination is made visible when Melkorka, distraught at being separated from Brigid, waves the pouch she has kept hidden from Clay Man and shakes loose the stork feathers she had collected before they were captured. As Clay Man takes the feath-

ers and the gold teething ring that her mother had given her to prove her royal blood, he looks at her with wonder as he sounds out the syllables, “a-ist” (*Hush*, 125). She is, henceforth, known as “Aist,” who, Maeve tells her, is a “stork who has the power to change form into a woman”—an “enchantress” (*Hush*, 181). The awe and fear that Clay Man now displays toward Melkorka empowers her to resist and defy him. Silent herself, she restores the power of speech to others by loosening gags, even though she is, at first, assaulted by a crew member for so doing until defended by Clay Man. She narrates proudly that “many tongues are free now. These children control so little, but they are masters of what they say, at least. And that’s my doing. I restored that right” (*Hush*, 146). The legend also works its power on Hoskuld, who insists on taking the stork feathers from the slave trader when he buys Melkorka. “Our God Hoenir is long-legged,” Hoskuld tells Clay Man. “Some say he’s a stork” (*Hush*, 214).

Napoli’s story illustrates the intertwining of belief, myth, and cultural practices. The Russian Clay Man sells virgins to Norsemen because of the Norse warriors’ beliefs in the myths of Valhalla and the Valkyriers. A dying man wishes to be left to die on deck where he will be found by the Valkyriers, rather than be thrown into the sea. Hoskuld recoils from the thought of killing an eagle for a sacrificial feast because Odin and Freya can be disguised as an eagle or falcon, respectively. Through Norse myth, Melkorka is exposed to a different cultural discourse of myth and meaning. She had ridiculed, at first, the meanings the Norse assigned to birds. Now she also uses the mythological association made between birds and women as she identifies herself with the mythological stork, Aist. Melkorka also associates the defiance and bravery of Maeve, Thora (a young *praell* friend), and particularly Brigid with the small buzzard who circles the ship and fights off seagulls. The association between this buzzard and the shape-changing Freya (known as the goddess of love and fertility) is strengthened as Melkorka finds the buzzard’s nest in the prow of Hoskuld’s ship toward the end of their voyage to Iceland. In a mood of acceptance and foresight, Melkorka tells herself that she will be like the bird who has braved the ocean to stay with her eggs in the nest she has made home.

Storytelling is associated in the text with a transcendental power to inculcate and preserve culture and cultural roots. Melkorka determines she will use stories to bestow upon her baby his “Irish heritage”—stories about “Finn and Cúchulainn and the warrior queen Medb and all the

others.” She will “sing loud and long in the language that is [her] birth-right” (*Hush*, 307).

### Strong Women

The *Laxdæla Saga* is known, among the better-known sagas, for the amount of space it devotes to women characters.<sup>12</sup> According to notes accompanying the online translation, there is some textual basis for thinking it was authored by a woman.<sup>13</sup> Napoli has built upon this emphasis in the saga by foregrounding women’s fighting spirits through Melkorka and Brigid and by the inclusion of other strong women characters. At the beginning of the novel, Melkorka states that she regrets the changes in the law that forbade women to fight as they had done in the past. She tells her mother that she wishes she could be a warrior so as to defend and protect her family, but her mother tells her to hush. Melkorka’s mother is, herself, represented as a strong woman, able to negotiate with the clergy over the royal succession when her son is mutilated and to carry out a plan to rescue her daughters from danger. She uses the power of language to voice her opinions and is not willingly silenced by her husband, who calls her a “headstrong” woman (*Hush*, 49).

Women’s strength is also represented through two women slaves, Maeve, the storyteller, and the canny elderly healer, Tordil, who uses Melkorka as her assistant in healing the sick and wounded during the voyage to Iceland on Hoskuld’s ship. Napoli says that her favorite character in the novel is Brigid. If she wrote a sequel it would focus on Brigid’s escape and what happened to her in the northern lands. She would survive, Napoli was sure, but would endure hardships that she, as a writer, would not shirk in telling (Napoli, author interview). Brigid is represented as an intelligent, feisty girl who has a mind of her own. Melkorka, later, remembers how she relied on Brigid’s intelligence after Brigid had jumped ship.

There is no flight for freedom for Melkorka. She does not escape her life as a slave, but she has hope that Hoskuld will honor his son as family. Her son will be a “free man” (*Hush*, 308). Melkorka is freed from Hoskuld’s power in one regard. Napoli tells in her notes how his wife refuses to allow Melkorka to be his concubine; and so she becomes an ordinary slave. Hoskuld learns the truth about Melkorka when he discovers her speaking Gaelic to their son. Napoli ends the story with Melkorka’s arrival in Iceland. In the *Laxdæla Saga*, the story continues with Melkorka’s

son, Olaf Peacock, who visits Eire to see his grandfather, King Myrkjarhan. Olaf shows him Melkorka's gold teething ring to prove his identity. The narrative also includes the exploits of Melkorka's grandson, Kjarten. Reviewers concur that *Hush* is a powerful novel. It was selected as a 2009 ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

In each of the previous novels, Napoli reworks narratives from her sources—Biblical text, legend, and saga—into young adult novels to show how youthful outsiders combat the prejudice, hypocrisy, and oppression embedded in specific sociocultural settings. In *Song of the Magdalene* and *Breath*, Napoli, who demonstrates a caring for the disabled in her work with deaf children, portrays adolescent protagonists whose bodily infirmities belie their inner resources and intelligence. She emphasizes in *Song of the Magdalene* and *Hush* the way in which young women have been bound by gender-biased ideologies in specific cultural contexts, and she emphasizes the power of their voices to sing, or be silent, respectively. Reproduced in these novels are humanist values that affirm the agency of individuals to resist ideologies that oppress them, including strength of character and the use of language and reason for empowering self. Napoli challenges teens to think critically about issues regarding the wielding of power and morality. For example, she raises questions about religion and its relation to the oppression of women in *Song of the Magdalene*, to slavery in *Hush*, and to witchcraft in *Breath*. Napoli returns to issues of oppression and resistance in *Stones in Water* and *Fire in the Hills*, discussed in chapter 8, and in *Alligator Bayou*, discussed in chapter 9.

## NOTES

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11. April Sisak, review of *Hush: An Irish Princess' Tale*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 61, no. 7 (March 2008), 300, [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/bulletin\\_of\\_the\\_center\\_for\\_childrens\\_books/v061/61.7spisak07.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/bulletin_of_the_center_for_childrens_books/v061/61.7spisak07.html) (accessed 1/5/2009).
12. Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 137.
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## Chapter Seven

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# Romance in Florence and Venice: *The Smile*, *Daughter of Venice*, and *For the Love of Venice*

NAPOLI SETS SEVERAL OF HER NOVELS IN ITALY, a country with which she has close ties. Historical romances *The Smile* and *Daughter of Venice* are set in fifteenth-century Florence and sixteenth-century Venice, respectively. The concept of the bound female adolescent is a dominant motif in both novels but used in a different sense from the binding of Wei Ping in *Bound* or the bondage of Melkorka in *Hush*. Elisabetta in *The Smile* and Donata in *Daughter of Venice* enjoy the status and lifestyles of noblewomen, but their opportunities are limited because of cultural and societal gender constraints. Napoli shows how cultural, political, and economic issues, relevant to the times in which the novels are set, directly impact the lives and romances of her protagonists. In *For the Love of Venice*, for example, set in Venice in the 1980s, a teenager visiting Venice with his family becomes involved in more than a summer romance when he discovers that his new Venetian girlfriend and her friends are opposed to an engineering project spearheaded by his father.

In *The Smile*, Napoli notes how she worked with historical facts in writing about Florence, the Medici family, and the painting by Leonardo da Vinci known in the United States as *Mona Lisa* and in Italy as *La Gioconda*. She notes the disagreements about the identity of the woman in the portrait, which is neither dated, signed, nor given a title. In creating her own portrait of the young woman who becomes the model for Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Napoli holds "true to undisputed historical data" and looks at "controversial points as offering freedom to make choices that would move [her] tale in interesting directions." She takes "liberties with shaping

personal lives, always with an eye toward what was possible, and sometimes statistically probable, for the society as a whole" (*The Smile*, 260).

### A YOUNG NOBLEWOMAN AND SOCIAL CLASS IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

The subject of Napoli's novel is Elisabetta di Antonia Maria di Nolda Gherardini, who narrates her own story. Napoli composes a rich panorama with details about society, politics, and the arts in fifteenth-century Florence as background and context for Elisabetta's life up to the time she sits as a model for Leonardo da Vinci. Elisabetta was born into a noble family, although her family belongs to the country nobility as opposed to the wealthy noble families within the City of Florence. Her father, a silk merchant, runs his business from their home at Villa Vignamaggio outside Florence. The surrounding countryside is lovingly described by thirteen-year-old Elisabetta at the beginning of the novel.

Elisabetta's friendship with Silvia and her brother, Christiano, whose father works at the Villa, serves to illumine their relative social positions within a rigid Florentine class society composed of nobles and peasants. Christiano refers to Elisabetta as "Mona Nobility" after a tiff between them, during which Elisabetta becomes aware of the resentment harbored by her childhood friends. Time and time again, Elisabetta is warned, first by her mother, then by other noblewomen, that her friendship with Silvia is unseemly. Silvia is there to help her; they are not friends. Elisabetta's mother also worries that her daughter will adopt Silvia's country dialect. The socioeconomic differences shaping the lives of Elisabetta and Silvia are made apparent when Silvia comments, "Nobles have better food than peasants—and nobles have doctors" so that it is "natural" that the nobility thrives (*The Smile*, 71). Silvia is bitter when she is told that she will not be able to attend Elizabeth's belated coming-out party held in a Florentine noblewoman's home. "But life's unfair," Silvia continues. "Nobility and peasants—they don't have real friendships" (*The Smile*, 151). Silvia is proved wrong by the end of the novel, but the conflict between Elisabetta's loyalty to her friend and her necessity to comply with societal rules is made central to their relationship. In fifteenth-century Florence, no matter whether a girl was born into a peasant or a noble family, she had little say in her future. Silvia spells it out: "We both got hardly no choices

of our own anyways. That's how it is. That's how it's always been. Ain't never going to change. But, hell, I'd sure trade my world for yours right now" (*The Smile*, 151).

### Limited Choices

Napoli delineates the limitations that constrain the lives of young women in fifteenth-century Florence. It is a society in which fathers decide when their daughters should marry and whom they should marry, although in theory, women are supposed to give their consent. But, as Silvia explains, she cannot survive on her own if her father throws her out for disobedience. Elisabetta's mother sees her daughter's marriage, at fifteen years of age, as a way for her to help her family achieve a higher status. Elisabetta's father, unlike some fathers, does not consider her marriage merely in terms of a financial bargain and is willing to host her expensive party so that she can meet appropriate suitors. However, in a society in which many young women die in childbirth, marriage for girls like Elisabetta frequently requires that they marry a widower with young children. "Widowers make attentive husbands," Elisabetta's mother assures her when Elisabetta protests. She did not make "the rules," she tells her daughter. "This is the way the world is" (*The Smile*, 8). Elisabetta, still defiant, determines that she "will not be married off to an old man with a bulging purse" (*The Smile*, 10).

Elisabetta is soon aware of the realities of the societal mores regarding marriage. When her mother is killed as she accompanies her daughter and husband on horseback to Florence, Elisabetta's father, to her outrage, courts a nineteen-year-old woman within a year after her mother's death. It is Silvia who tells her that it is usual for widowers to begin "courting" as soon as they find an appropriate young woman: Elisabetta's father has his needs and also has need of a woman in the home (*The Smile*, 90). Elisabetta learns that her deepest desires are circumscribed by the realities of the familial, societal, and political context in which she is placed. At first, it seems that she will be able to marry whom she chooses when she is introduced by Leonardo da Vinci, a friend of her father's, to Giuliano Medici, youngest of the Medici brothers, just after the death of his father, Lorenzo de Medici. The camaraderie established between Elisabetta and Giuliano deepens into romantic love.

When her mother first learns of their friendship, she shows her willingness to encourage the match, for it would propel Elisabetta to the

upper echelons of the nobility. But her mother's death and political events intervene. Florence is plunged into political turmoil, and Giuliano leaves for war before he can speak to her father about their betrothal. A secret meeting of the lovers, arranged when Giuliano returns for a brief visit, is interrupted by Elisabetta's father, who drives him away shouting that Elisabetta is already betrothed to her stepmother's brother-in-law, Francesco di Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, another silk merchant whose wife had died in childbirth. It is "his right to marry" her off, her father tells her as he slaps her face. It has already been arranged (*The Smile*, 218). When Elisabetta receives a letter from Giuliano voicing his own reasons why he cannot marry her and asking her for her forgiveness, she reluctantly gives her consent to marriage with Francesco but comments, "I slide over the icy days toward the end that I feel has been inexorable from the beginning—from when I was born a girl" (*The Smile*, 223).

Represented at the beginning of the novel as a spirited young girl, Elisabetta grows into a mature young woman who comes to terms with the choices made for her. She finds happiness with her children and husband despite the loss of the love she had so passionately desired. The choices for women are made clear: an arranged marriage, disgrace and exile, or the convent. Elisabetta knows that her choices as a woman are "limited. Particularly if she loves her father and her stepmother—sister. Particularly if she honors the memory of her mother" (*The Smile*, 235).

### **Female Bonding and an Ethic of Responsibility**

As in *Song of the Magdalene*, Napoli places emphasis on female bonding and sisterhood—concepts that are congruent with some contemporary feminist theories on the value of relationships and interdependence. Toward the end of the novel, Elisabetta has developed a loving relationship with Caterina, her stepmother, who is now like a sister to her, after a long period of resentment in which she had refused Caterina's overtures of friendship. She takes care of her friend, Silvia, who has a history of miscarriages. Scenes of domesticity in which Elisabetta, Caterina, and Silvia work together in the kitchen give a sense of community between three young women regardless of social hierarchy and class. Value is placed in the story on loyalty and responsibility to family—an ethic that is found all through Napoli's body of work. When Leonardo da Vinci walks back into Elisabetta's life and takes her to his studio, where she meets Giuliano

after over eight years of marriage, during which she has been mother to Francesco's son, Bartholomew, and to her own children, Elisabetta gives voice to her duty to family, which takes precedence over her own desires. "The love that binds me to all of them while so different from the passion of my youth, is essential. I will not be drawn off the path. I will not even stumble. Loyalty" (*The Smile*, 242–243). Although Elisabetta expresses remnants of pain at the loss of Giuliano, she affirms that she does not regret the years since they last met. Elisabetta is represented in Napoli's text as empowered by marriage and motherhood, as she joyfully expects the new child she has chosen to bear. But, as Napoli also makes clear in her story, Elisabetta has also experienced that "the personal is the political," which her father had pointed out was the message of the times (*The Smile*, 185). Elisabetta's story is closely connected to the larger political context of fifteenth-century Florence.

### A Portrait

Napoli provides detailed explanations for the Medicis' fall from power and their exile from Florence, an exile that is shown to directly affect Elisabetta's future. Elisabetta's father, for example, had taken sides against the Medici family. The City of Florence, once celebrated for its patronage of the arts, deteriorates under the tyranny of the monk Savonarola, who virtually ruled the City after he had succeeded in rousing the citizenry to banish the Medici family. Books and paintings are burned, and artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, had left Florence to seek patronage elsewhere only to return after Savonarola is finally imprisoned, tortured, and burned in 1498. The significance art has for Florence and its citizens is acknowledged by Elisabetta as she realizes that art is the "heartbeat of the city—art glorified to the point of being sacred, the artist as close to God" (*The Smile*, 244). A description of the life and works of Leonardo da Vinci is integrated into the text. Established once more in Florence, Leonardo persuades Elisabetta to travel with him to Florence where she sees Giuliano for the last time.

Napoli explains in her notes that she constantly referred to the portrait as she tried to "glean information from the mysterious woman's eyes and her jawline and, most of all, her smile" (*The Smile*, 260). Her interpretation of the portrait is seen in Leonardo's words to Elisabetta when she was thirteen years old: "Mysteries promise in those limpid eyes, as though you're watching and waiting. As though nothing will really surprise you. It's unsettling"

(*The Smile*, 36). Leonardo tells Elisabetta that her portrait, which takes four years to complete, will be his best work. He tells her that she is “the soul of the Republic—countryside and city all in one—and he will give the world that soul in my portrait” (*The Smile*, 255). The portrait, she discovers, had been commissioned by Giuliana, who had given her the name *Mona Lisa*. He wished Leonardo to capture her smile, which had always captivated him, so that it would “smile” at him, from every angle (*The Smile*, 255).

The explanation given in the novel for the anonymity of the portrait is Elisabetta’s decision to refuse Leonardo the power to fix her identity. She neither wishes to be identified by the name given to her by Giuliano nor does she wish to be known only by her married name, *La Gioconda*. Her identity, she implies, is more than can be contained in either name. The portrait, however, is important to Elisabetta. Privately, she agreed to sit for Leonardo because of her vanity, and because she believes she is of import to his art. Also, she adds, it will allow her to “persist” (*The Smile*, 253). Elisabetta draws strength from her roles as wife and mother, but she makes it clear that she is eager to maintain a strong sense of self.

In *The Smile*, as in *Spinners*, Napoli depicts a female protagonist whose development extends beyond girlhood to early marriage and motherhood. Trites argues that adolescents achieve maturity in young adult novels only when they become reconciled to the power of the social institutions with which they must interact in order to survive.<sup>1</sup> Her empowerment (as does Saskia’s in *Spinners*) comes from recognizing what is possible in a society in which rules of marriage and gendered roles are so firmly entrenched. In *Smile* and *Daughter of Venice*, Napoli makes visible for readers the ways in which choices were historically limited for women in specific patriarchal societies. However, she views the story of Donata in *Daughter of Venice*—and Donata and Elisabetta, themselves—as being very different.<sup>2</sup> Although Donata is also noble-born, she has different ambitions for her future than are voiced by Elisabetta. Donata is driven by the desire to attain an education over and above the usual limited education available for Venetian girls in the sixteenth century.

### DISCOVERING VENICE

Napoli is well acquainted with Venice. After spending time in Venice as a graduate student, she returned as often as she could, stretching out

grants so that she could spend full summers there. Later, she also spent summers there with her family from 1988 to 1991, when her husband was appointed as director of a “summer legal program in Padova,” which was a short train ride away.<sup>3</sup> Napoli’s love and knowledge of Venice are clearly visible in both *Daughter of Venice* and *For the Love of Venice*. Venice is a major locus of the story as Napoli shows how her protagonists explore an inner Venice previously unknown to them. This enables Napoli to integrate into her novels much descriptive detail about Venice: its architecture, history, society, and culture, as well as its fragility. As one reviewer writes, “Napoli paints Venice with loving detail . . . readers can revel in its sights, smells, and tastes.”<sup>4</sup> In *Daughter of Venice*, set in 1592, fourteen-year-old Donata Mocenigo, second daughter of one of the wealthiest noble families in Venice, secretly goes outside her family’s *palazzo* walls to discover a Venice that has been hidden from her. “The mysteries of Venice are like a rainbow—and I am soon to be shut away from them. It’s as though my future has lost its color” (*Daughter*, 91).<sup>5</sup>

### The Republic of Venice

A detailed description of the culture and society of sixteenth-century Venice is provided through Donata’s first-person narration. As in fifteenth-century Florence, a girl’s future is determined by her parents, and marriage is central to these arrangements. Donata confides that she and her twin sister, Laura, harbor a secret. They are hoping against hope that they might both be married because their futures are circumscribed: marriage or the convent—unless one of them is chosen to be a maiden aunt and assigned the care of a brother’s children. Her father, Donata knows, might be able to afford to secure a marriage for one of his daughters, usually the eldest, and perhaps a second. But it is hard to think that either Laura or herself will marry and leave the other behind.

As in *The Smile*, it is a mother’s voice that conveys the rules by which a daughter must live. In answer to Donata’s protests at life in a convent, her mother spells out the advantages: Women are “protected” (*Daughter*, 49), although they have more freedom than Donata would believe because people understand their “sacrifice” (*Daughter*, 51). She spells out the realities of girls’ lives: Love was not guaranteed outside the convent. “Falling in love has little to do with a good marriage,” she tells Donata and Laura. Adrianna, her oldest daughter, will have to be satisfied with the husband

chosen for her (*Daughter*, 52). She admonishes Donata not to “play the rebel.” She should accept how things are (*Daughter*, 51). The constraints on young noblewomen are placed in the context of Donata’s large family, in which young men are similarly restricted by Venetian law and tradition. At a family dinner, her father explains that, according to Venetian law, the sons of the family will share equally in the family’s wealth, which is why only one son may marry. The other brothers live in companionship in the family home. Donata hears how their father carefully assesses his sons’ abilities and announces his plans for a unique path and education for three of his sons, but she notes that she and Laura are excluded from his discussion.

Donata is represented as a young woman with an enquiring mind who develops a critical awareness of women’s position in sixteenth-century Venetian society. Women, for example, cannot vote or join the guilds. A defining moment, for Donata, is when she steps into the Brandolini family’s map room—“a man’s territory”—and sees a map of Venice with all its canals, alleys, bridges, and *palazzos*. She realizes that she does not really know her own republic (*Daughter*, 10). She becomes increasingly aware of how women are perceived as second-class citizens in Venetian society when she looks at a picture depicting a procession that includes men from her family. In looking at the women watching the procession from the balcony, Donata is struck by their likenesses. She notices that the “women are repeated every twelve panels.” They look as if they have been “done from a pattern,” but, she notes, “each man in the procession is unique—even though there must be over a hundred of them” (*Daughter*, 31). Donata determines to see and learn more of Venice before she is, in all likelihood, sent to a convent. With help from her sisters, who will cover for her absences, she ventures, alone, outside the *palazzo* walls.

### **Stepping Outside the *Palazzo* Walls**

Donata gains entry to the alleys of Venice dressed in the clothes of a fisher-boy, but she makes it clear that this is not an issue of changing her gender identity. She does not wish to “be a man.” She just wants the “privileges of a man. Or, at least one privilege: free passage.” She must, she tells her sisters, take the opportunity while she can, but she would not trade her “womanhood for it” (*Daughter*, 55). Donata’s experiences as a girl in

boy's clothing, however, serve to bring to the foreground issues of gender and how gender is outwardly perceived. Napoli shows that Donata, a sheltered young woman, does not find it easy to masquerade as a street-smart boy, especially when accosted by a beggar boy who warns her against encroaching on his territory. He notes her long hair, tucked down the "nape of [her] neck," her "white skin," her "fake fancy talk," but even so, her female gender remains masked as he warns, "Whatever gimmick you've got, boy, go use it some-place else" (*Daughter*, 72). Behavior, clothes, and mannerisms are integral elements of performing gender. Donata's first challenge is that she does not look the part of the fisher-boy she pretends to be. Her second challenge is that she cannot perform well as a gendered male because not only does she exhibit fear of being accosted, she does not always know what behavior is appropriate. She sits, for example, rather than stands in a gondolier.

She faces more difficulties when she meets Noé, a young Jewish man who assists her with a splinter that has become embedded in her bare foot when she wanders into the ghetto. As the young man carries her on his back into his home, Donata is afraid he will sense her "femininity" (*Daughter*, 79). When she returns to Noé's home in order to pay him for the *zoccoli* he had lent her to walk back home in, he now questions her in regard to the kind of clothes she wears, which are at odds with her "tender" feet and hands and her manner of speaking. He regards with suspicion her offer to repay him with a valuable brooch (*Daughter*, 13). She is Donato, she tells him, from a noble family, and when he refuses the brooch, he/she agrees to work for him for two weeks.

Napoli constructs, in these scenes, a fluidity of identity that she associates with adolescence. Donata demonstrates that she can perform gender, somewhat imperfectly, as she shifts between male and female in a complicated situation. In order to work as a copyist at the printing house where Noé works, Donato will have to become Donata, Noé explains, because boys must be members of the guild to work, whereas girls cannot join the guild. However, she can work on an unofficial basis as a girl. As Donata puts it, she will "be a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to be a girl" (*Daughter*, 119). Noé refers to Donato's "girly" looks (*Daughter*, 119) and later comments on how he/she sounds "like a girl" and looks "sexy" (*Daughter*, 130). But his credulity in the persona of Donato holds until Donata is forced to reveal her identity.

### Choices: Responsibility to Self or to Others

Donata's forays into Noé's world have consequences. Her actions are shown to hurt Laura, her twin sister, by almost causing Laura, who desires marriage and motherhood deeply, to lose her one chance of happiness. Their father has decided he can afford the marriage of one more daughter. Laura has covered for Donata's absences by completing Donata's daytime tasks. Their unsuspecting mother, thinking Donata is working extra hours in the evening rather than making up for missed work, is impressed by Donata's newfound industriousness and her aptness for business. She believes Donata is the right partner for Robert Priuli, whose family is involved in the wool industry (*Daughter*, 174). Donata is torn between satisfying her own desires and needs and acknowledging the pain she is causing her loyal sister. She had not intended to hurt Laura and does not want to take her "rightful place." She had wished for a husband many times, but this is not how she wants it to be. It is now time for her "to think about Laura," and she prays for help in righting the wrong she has done her sister (*Daughter*, 166). Donata's family, with its warm and close relationships among siblings and parents, is given a central place in the novel. As in *The Smile*, Napoli places value on a young woman's ethical responsibility and loyalty to family as Donata seeks to find a way out of her dilemma.

### Love, Loss, and Renunciation

When all her arguments against her future marriage fail, Donata resorts to a denunciation of self, using an old tradition in Venice whereby a written denunciation is made public by placing it in a *bocce di leone*, a receptacle shaped like a "lion's mouth" which Donata finds on a wall near the Basilica in the Piazza of San Marco (*Daughter*, 246–47). In her newly acquired Latin, Donata writes that Donata Aurelia Mocenigo "has converted to Judaism" (*Daughter*, 243). Napoli places Donata's denunciation into historical context through explanations she has requested from her tutor about denunciations, trials, and other legal matters. She knows the consequences. She renounces the chance to marry and have children—a future she no longer wishes to have without Noé. Donata's anguish is expressed in a language that acknowledges her physical desire:

Dear Lord, how could you teach me such profound love of the soul and deny me love of the body? Never to feel the weight of his hand, the heat

of his breath on my skin. Never to touch him, to embrace him. Never. What wretched loss. (*Daughter*, 245)

When masquerading as Donato, Donata, knowing that she had fallen for Noé, had questioned him closely on matters of religion and marriage. She realizes that as a believing Catholic, she can never be the wife that Noé, a Jew, would need or expect. There were “differences” that mattered (*Daughter*, 244). Neither, she realizes, after her initial excitement, can she be the wife of Priuli. She does not love him, and she would not marry for the sake of marrying. Donata’s father, realizing that marriage is not for Donata, clears the way for her to pursue her education. Donata’s aspiration to be educated is not without cost. Donata fits into Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair’s category of young women who are represented in historical novels as defying “gender constraints” but do so in order to realize their own ambitions. As Brown and St. Clair suggest, the empowerment of some girls “may exact a significant toll.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Education: An Ambition Achieved**

The education of women is an important issue for Napoli, who speaks about how her family “valued” education and how it was “a key” to her own life. Education, she says, can “pick you up” and “put you elsewhere,” and this is also true historically.<sup>7</sup> Donata is represented as rebelling against a hierarchical and patriarchal system in which the education of noblewomen was usually restricted to music and dance. Napoli is careful to show that Donata’s ambition is possible. As she makes clear, it was unusual, but not unprecedented, for noblewomen, at the time during which the novel is set, to be educated. She provides examples in her story of Italian women poets and scholars such as Marcella Marcello and the Venetian poet Modesta da Pozzo (*Daughter*, 268). In a note, she explains that her story “is dedicated to the spirit of Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia,” who was “the first woman to be awarded a doctoral degree: Doctor of Philosophy, University of Padua, in 1678,” and also “to the spirits of the women in the centuries before . . . and since who have longed for such an opportunity but were not so fortunate” (*Daughter*, 273). The reality of the difficulty of a woman’s being admitted to university degree programs at the time is also acknowledged. Donata is denied admittance to the doctoral program in theology but will be admitted into the program for philosophy after two more years of study.

Napoli situates Donata in a family that has a history of breaking traditions. Her father had married a woman whose family were not nobles—a fact that has hampered his career. Her mother, although she now represents traditional values in her role as mother of a noble family, had been free in her youth to visit her father's woolen factory. If she had been a boy, she tells her daughters, she would have broken tradition and had wool dyed in bright colors. Donata's family is shown to value education, especially her father. In response to Donata's pleas that she and Laura attend tutorials with their brothers, he agrees that they may "listen in" as an "experiment." He knows that Donata's "mind that can hold so many numbers needs more nourishment, or it will languish and die" (*Daughter*, 104). The family tutor, initially resistant to Donata's presence in his tutorials, acknowledges her intellect and encourages her in her studies. Finally, Donata's ambition to be a tutor herself is to be realized within her family circle and within the boundaries of her social class. She will be allowed to assist in teaching her younger siblings, and she hopes to tutor her brother Antonio's children and other noble children, including, perhaps, women and girls.

There has been criticism of representations of young girls in historical novels who rebel against their situation in various historical contexts. Anne Scott MacLeod warns against inserting modern sensibilities into historical fiction featuring young female protagonists and setting aside "the social mores of the past."<sup>8</sup> While it can be said that the young women in *The Smile* and *Daughter of Venice* are especially insightful regarding their choices and limitations, Napoli seeks to imagine possibilities for them within the constraints of the ideologies of gender in the time and culture in which they live. One reviewer questions Donna's behavior in cross-dressing and Noé's response.<sup>9</sup> But, in both novels, Napoli exposes the ways in which power—political, economic, and social—impacted upon the lives of young women in medieval societies in Florence and Italy.

### FROM OUTSIDER TO INSIDER

In *For the Love of Venice*, the fragility of a contemporary Venice is made integral to a story in which two young people from different countries strengthen a romantic relationship by listening to and learning from each other. Seventeen-year-old Percy, from the United States, is reluctantly

spending the summer in Venice with his family. Napoli, in this story, too, employs the trope of a young person moving from the view of someone outside the heart of the city to discovering a different Venice. Like Donata, Percy wanders around Venice trying to find his bearings, realizing that “so much of Venice was hidden from the tourist’s eye” (*Love of Venice*, 34).<sup>10</sup> His outsider status is reinforced by his Italian phrase book and his lack of knowledge about the carnival masks he sees everywhere. “The carnival was a Catholic celebration, and Percy wasn’t Catholic. He spoke English and he wasn’t Catholic” (*Love of Venice*, 159). He notes the preponderance of private gardens behind walls topped with shards of glass or barbed wire. He tells of a visit to a Venetian family whose “beautifully varnished door” they reached after passing through “a shambles of an alley.” When he steps inside, he finds he is in a palace with a marble floor and high ceilings with decorated plaster moldings (*Love of Venice*, 34). “Venice might not be like what it appeared at all,” he thinks, as he subsequently finds a prison located in the midst of a neighborhood (*Love of Venice*, 39).

The peeling away of facades continues as Percy is taken by the young woman, Graziella, with whom he falls in love, to a Venetian night club where only “real Venetians” go—“the people no one cares about, the people no one sees” (*Love of Venice*, 108). Here, beyond the tourists’ surface view of Venice, Percy finds how it is to be subjected to Venetians’ view of outsiders, especially Americans. He feels conspicuously American, even down to his “underwear and bones.” Seeing a sign “Americani, Americagne,” Percy understands the implications of the word-play: “dogs” and “bitches” (*Love of Venice*, 111). Through Graziella, Percy meets a group of young people who are against Venice’s being host to Expo because of the tourists that will swamp their city. When he sees their slogans on walls, he feels that the words shout right at him: “Percy, the American, the tourist” (*Love of Venice*, 158). The issue of stereotyping is highlighted as Percy and Graziella trade prejudicial remarks made against both Americans and Italians. It is when he visits Graziella’s apartment and meets her grandmother—her “Nonna”—that Percy is introduced to an insider’s perspective of Venice.

### A Fragile City

In *For the Love of Venice*, Napoli brings together concerns and protests against Venice’s hosting of Expo and information about the “MOSE project,” a floodgate project designed to protect the city and lagoon from

flooding as a result of storms in the Adriatic. Percy, whose father is an engineer in charge of the MOSE project, finds himself in a critical position as he begins to understand that Graziella and her friends are opposed to Expo, and that they are willing to sabotage the new sea wall designed to protect the city from the coming bora. As a result, Venice would flood and city officials would be forced to admit that Venice was not a safe venue for hosting Expo. Percy's father, an outsider, is of the view that Venice is a "city in decay" because Venetians refuse "to come to terms with the passing of time" (*Love of Venice*, 34). Percy understands that for Graziella, the political issue of Expo is also personal. From her insider's perspective, Graziella, who is from a working-class family, explains to Percy how she will be affected by Expo: how, for example, house prices will rise and she will not be able to stay in Venice. People are not allowed to buy houses, she tells Percy, unless they are willing to restore them with "original" looking facades that date back, at least, to the sixteenth century (*Love of Venice*, 117). Through listening to Graziella, Percy is exposed to the reality of how tourism affects Venetians. A tourist's view of the Venetian *gondoliere* is stripped of its romanticism as Graziella, whose father was a gondolier, tells about the physical pain that accompanies their work and the strict rules regarding the passing down of licenses from father to son. Napoli deals in her story with a very real dilemma: preserving Venice as a museum versus the vital need for Venetians to have jobs and a life not based solely on the tourist trade. In a review of *For the Love of Venice*, Ilene Cooper argues that readers will "find themselves thinking about social issues that have never occurred to them before."<sup>11</sup>

### BROADENING PERSPECTIVES

In all three novels, young people are represented as broadening their perspectives. In *The Smile*, Elisabetta, who, as a girl, had not pursued education with much enthusiasm, finds wisdom and comfort from reading Plato and his ideas on society during the book-burning era of Savonarola. In *Daughter of Venice*, over and above her formal education, Donata develops an insight as to how Venice has survived as a wealthy republic: the nobility have lived off "the backs of poor people" (*Daughter*, 217). She learns from her father that the pragmatic values of Venetian life are based on trade, business, and money. From Noé, she learns about the Venetian ghetto

and the history and culture of the Jewish community, as well as an understanding of the printing and copying industry. She also gains from him a sympathetic understanding of the role of courtesans in Venetian society. Outside her *palazzo* walls, Donata encounters beggar boys and turns from prisoners as their hands stretch out toward her through the bars just above the level of the canal. Napoli constructs, for young adult readers, a holistic view of Venice and its society in the sixteenth century.

Percy's mother had told him that his summer in Venice would be a transformative experience. "Just remember that, Percy—transformation" (*Love of Venice*, 6). Percy gains an understanding of his father's work and of some of the social and economic dilemmas facing the Venetians, including the pollution from industrial waste and fertilizers. He and Graziella learn from listening to one another. Graziella "saw the world differently," Percy realizes (*Love of Venice*, 120). Napoli sets up debates—some serious, some teasing—between Percy and Graziella in which, as one reviewer notes, they "expose the fallacies in one another's thinking" (Fakolt, 148). In discussing the choice between allowing Venice to flood to prevent Expo or focusing, as Percy insists, on the dangers of sabotaging MOSE, Graziella asks Percy how one decided when one thing was "more important than another" (*Love of Venice*, 239). Percy emphasizes the dangers posed to people from allowing Venice to flood. His stance is representative of a moral choice that advocates social responsibility over and above Graziella's view that Venetians had to "pay the price" to save Venice even if people suffered (*Love of Venice*, 212). Choosing between responsibility to self and between responsibility to others is a recurring theme in *The Smile*, *Daughter of Venice*, and *For the Love of Venice*, albeit in different contexts. Underlying all stories is a view of young people as responsible, critical thinkers. The focus of romance in these novels is on the forging of egalitarian relationships between young people in which love is expressed in terms of sensual desire, rather than on sex and sexual relations *per se*. Giuliano, Noé, and Percy are examples of the thoughtful, caring young men found in Napoli's novels, from *Prince of the Pond* to *Crazy Jack*. Percy, especially, demonstrates that he possesses empathy and nurturing skills as he helps a small boy with a disability while working as a volunteer at a Don Bosco church summer camp for Venetian children. He also undertakes, with Graziella, a risky search for his younger brother in floodwater when the flood gates' electric generators fail during a storm.

Reviewers refer to Napoli's thorough research. For example, a reviewer of *The Smile* in *Booklist* draws attention to Napoli's "vibrant settings, from

opulent Florentine palaces to rustic hillside villas, with tangible, sensory details that enliven the novel's intriguing references to history and art."<sup>12</sup> Napoli's attention to detail is evident in *The Smile*, from her fascinating description of the process of hand-spinning silk from the cocoons of silkworms to the detailing of recipes for the different regional dishes served in the households of noble and peasant. In reference to her research on food, Napoli explains that when she gets "into an Italian book," she gets "into food and smells and the texture of life in a way that almost can't avoid being similar in any book that deals with Italy." She adds that there is actually "no Italian cuisine. There is only regional cuisine. Yet the way the meals are placed on the table, the way the food is arranged on the dishes, the way the family behaves at meal times, these things are common" to some parts of Italy and to the history of Italy."<sup>13</sup> Napoli's blending of the history of architecture with the politics and society of Venice in *Daughter of Venice* is reminiscent of John Ruskin's classic, *Stones of Venice*, in which Ruskin writes in detail about Venetian history, society, politics, and, especially, architecture (3 vol., 1851–1853). In *Daughter of Venice*, Donata and her brothers discuss with their tutor the architecture for the new *palazzo*. What follows is a detailed description of the arches and columns of the new palace, as Donata and her brothers distinguish among various architectural styles. Donata gives her opinion that the "architecture that harks back to the Greeks" used for the *palazzo* is too "heavy" for a "city of light and water where colors flourish, because," she thinks, "maybe" there is in Venice a "spirit of hope" (*Daughter*, 144).

In the next chapter, the connection with the history of Venice and Italy is continued in two novels that deal with the experiences of a Venetian boy caught up in the Second World War.

## NOTES

1. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 20.
2. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2009.
3. Donna Jo Napoli, personal copy of "Essay on the Occasion of Receiving the Sydney Taylor Older Children's Literature Award," 2. Reprinted in *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Librarians*, June 20–23, 1999, 277–278.

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4. Jennifer A. Fakolt, review of *For the Love of Venice*, *School Library Journal*, vol. 44, no. 6 (June 1, 1998), 148. Hereafter referred to as Fakolt.
  5. Quotes are from the paperback edition of *Daughter of Venice*.
  6. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990–2001* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2002), 57.
  7. Donna Jo Napoli, interview by author, March 14, 2008.
  8. Anne Scott MacLeod, "Writing Backward: Modern Models in Historical Fiction," *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January/February 1998), 26–33.
  9. JMD, review of *Daughter of Venice*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 55, no. 11 (July/August 2002), 413.
  10. Quotes are from the paperback edition of *For the Love of Venice*.
  11. Ilene Cooper, review of *For the Love of Venice*, *Booklist*, vol. 94, no. 17 (May 1, 1998), 1512.
  12. Gillian Engberg, review of *The Smile*, *Booklist*, vol. 105, no. 3 (October 1, 2008), 39.
  13. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2009.



# The Brutality of War: *Stones in Water* and *Fire in the Hills*

IN TWO HISTORICAL NOVELS SET DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, a darker side of history is presented than in Napoli's historical novels set in medieval Florence and Venice. In *Stones in Water* and its sequel, *Fire in the Hills*, Napoli does not shirk from writing about the horror of war: the kidnapping of boys to Nazi labor camps; the deportation of Jews to death camps; the wanton acts of aggression against innocent children, women, and men; and the sheer chaos and misery of war as seen from the eyes of her Italian teenage protagonist, Roberto.

In an essay written for the acceptance speech for the Sidney Taylor Book Award for *Stones in Water*,<sup>1</sup> Napoli talks about how the Second World War was an issue in her family when she was young. Her grandmother had defended Mussolini, to the chagrin of her parents, because of the improvements he had brought to rural Italy, such as better roads and education, and she refused to recognize his complicity with Hitler. Napoli says she is fascinated with World War II. Even though she was born after the war, she felt “ashamed” because Italy was an Axis power. She “wished deep [in her] heart that every Italian had deserted—that none of them had really wanted to be part of the war” (Napoli, Taylor, 2). Then, during the summers that she and her own family lived in Venice, she met her friend, Guido Fullin, who was abducted by German soldiers with other boys, including his elder brother, while at a movie theater. Guido was sent to work camps in Germany, Poland, and Russia before being captured by American troops. It was five years before he could return home. He was out of touch with his parents during the whole period.

Guido's story, Napoli continues, stayed with her. In 1993, while teaching linguistics in Geneva, she was told by the International Red Cross that not only Italian boys but also boys from Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria had been abducted. This "information," Napoli comments, "festered in my mind, like a wound" (Napoli, Taylor, 4). Napoli was able to access the archives of the International Red Cross, and what she read caused her to cry every night. Napoli tells how she continued with her research, interviewing librarians in Venice and Padova, who helped her find diaries of Italian soldiers who had deserted during the war, and meeting with other Venetians who had been abducted. She met with Professor Franco Berlanda, who gave her information about the *partigiani*. Most importantly, for her writing of *Stones in Water*, she spent "weeks in the Jewish ghetto in Venice, talking to people about their experiences in the war" (Napoli, Taylor, 4). She learned from them how "Venetian women, Jew and Catholic alike, had protested the war in open demonstrations in the campos." She learned that Venetian children were friends "with each other in secret" no matter what their religion (Napoli, Taylor, 4).

In her essay, Napoli shows how much her personal story and experiences intimately affect her writing about the historical past. The eviction of her family from their home when she was a child left her with the feeling that "life is fragile and everything I have, everything I know, everything I care about can be taken from me in an instant—that sense has stayed with me." This is the feeling, she says, that came back to her on hearing her friend Guido's story, which, she feels, "must have been in Guido's heart, and in the heart of every child in every war everywhere." She explains it is one of the reasons she wrote the book: "I wanted to expose that sense—to grapple with it—to overcome it" (Napoli, Taylor, 6).

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Napoli explains that she "wrote *Stones in Water* partly to open up a piece of history that hadn't been examined in history before, as far as" she knew, "and partly to explore the ways in which war affects children, no matter what so-called side they are on" (Napoli, Taylor, 5). As she does in all her novels, Napoli emphasizes the importance of understanding events from different perspectives. In *Stones in Water* and *Fire in the Hills*, reports of the progress of the war are presented from the standpoint of Italy—an

Axis power. For example, the newsreel in the cinema that Roberto attends with his brother and friends shows Italian soldiers, stationed in Tunis, North Africa, waving their caps at the camera. It is reported that although they had not been successful in Abyssinia, they “were doing their part valiantly” (*Stones*, 14).<sup>2</sup> Soon, the newsreel assured the audience, the Axis powers would be in charge. In *Fire in the Hills*, the focus of the war is on the conflict between the Germans and the Allies in Sicily; the German occupation of Italy; and the split between Italians loyal to Mussolini’s Fascists and those loyal to the Italian king, who eventually surrenders to the Allies. Napoli shows how an innocent young teenager, caught up in terrible events, loses his preconceptions of war as heroic. He begins to understand that war is not simply a case of one side against another. For example, the worsening relationship between Italian soldiers and German soldiers and the complicated military and political situation in Italy have a direct impact on Roberto and his struggle for survival. *Stones in Water* and *Fire in the Hills* are young adult novels that provide a complex presentation of war and patriotism in that they also deal with the consequences of war on citizens. Patriotism and victory take on different meanings as Roberto meets Italian deserters and members of the resistance—the *partigiani*.

### Changing Conceptions of War

When thirteen-year-old Roberto and his friends, Memo and Samuele, seize the chance to see an American Western at the Mestre movie theater accompanied by Roberto’s older brother, Sergio, they are forced from the theater by German soldiers as the film begins and herded onto a train that takes them through northern Italy and Austria until they disembark at Munich. The boys are shocked and confused. From their perspective the Germans are on the same side as Italy against England and America because Italy had signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan. Roberto, for example, had worried during the newsreel how the Axis powers could win if Japanese bombs were smaller than the new British bomb he had heard about. So despite the “stomping boots” of the soldiers (*Stones*, 15), a warning rifle shot, and their panic and fear, they do not, at first, believe that they are in real danger. They worry, rather, about their parents’ anger because they will be late home. “The Germans are on our side,” Roberto had said to Sergio before they were parted at the station (*Stones*, 17). Roberto even thinks they are being punished by being sent

home because they were watching an American film in wartime. It was all “a big mistake” (*Stones*, 12). On the train, one boy makes the suggestion that they are going to be made soldiers. They will be fighting alongside Germans, and in response to this, the boys sing patriotic songs. When they stop at the Austrian border, Roberto is sure they can go no farther because the law says they cannot cross without documents.

But the boys’ beliefs about the war are changed abruptly, together with the loss of any sense of power they still possess, when three boys express their wish to leave the train. Pushed by a soldier from the train and lined up on the platform, they are summarily executed by the same soldier as a lesson to the boys who watch “pressed in layers” from the train windows:

He shouted in German—fast and harsh. Then he held out his pistol and shot one of the boys in the head. Red spray fanned out in front of the boy as he fell forward. People screamed. One of the other two boys broke away and ran. The soldier shot him in the back. Then he shot the third boy in the head. They fell dead on the platform. Pools of blood widened around their bodies. (*Stones*, 27)

Quoting this passage in their book about the representation of children in war, Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox draw attention to the “starkness of the prose,” which “reflects the lack of feeling in the executioner and the numbed responses of the watchers on the train.”<sup>3</sup> The same ruthlessness and numbed responses are repeated in an incident that happens shortly after Roberto is assigned to his first job after leaving the train—digging, the boys suspect, graves. When one boy faints, he is shot. Roberto claps his “hand over his mouth to hold in the scream” and is slapped on both his cheeks by a soldier before he can climb, as ordered, into a truck (*Stones*, 38). The strategy of using an anonymous narrator, rather than the first person, brings a distancing and detachment to the telling of the story that conveys Roberto’s traumatized state as he is witness to atrocities. Now he also understands that the rule of law does not protect the disempowered in times of war. “It’s against the law,” whispers Roberto when the three boys are shot. “There are no more laws,” Roberto’s friend Memo responds” (*Stones*, 27).

Roberto’s attitude toward war changes as he experiences the harsh treatment meted out to the boys in the labor camps. Treated as slave labor, Roberto remembers how he used to play war as a young boy, pretending he had the power to overcome evil. He thinks back to how war was spoken

about as being heroic by those who attended drilling practices back home in Venice. He still cares about winning when he hears talk about German successes in Russia, but victory means only that he can return home. He is able, at times, to forget the alliance between Italy and Germany and think about fighting the German soldiers as though they were the enemy. When he eventually escapes from a labor camp in the Ukraine, Roberto is only too aware that as an Italian, he can now be seen as the enemy by the people of the Ukraine, and, indeed, he is so perceived when shot and briefly held prisoner until a young Ukrainian boy, whom Roberto had rescued earlier, helps him, in turn, to escape.

Roberto's journey of escape across the Ukraine in freezing weather is more than a survival and adventure story, as it is categorized in some reviews.<sup>4</sup> For Roberto (and readers) it is also a learning experience about the wider theater of war and the consequences of war on others. As one reviewer notes, he "puzzles out the changing borders and alliances of the war."<sup>5</sup> During his journey, Roberto has to constantly think about how he is perceived by others in order to survive the changing dynamics of war. When Roberto is accosted by an Italian deserter, Maurizio, who forces him to paddle him down the river toward the Black Sea, he refuses to speak, afraid that Maurizio might hand him back to the Germans, until he learns that Maurizio, as a deserter, is also at risk. As they cross borders, he and Maurizio switch back and forth from the roles of captor and captive: "I played our trick," Maurizio brags to Roberto, referring to Roberto's earlier attempt to save them both by posing as a Ukrainian boy with his prisoner (*Stones*, 196). It was lucky, Maurizio continues, that they were in Romania, one of the Axis powers in which an Italian uniform was still respected. Maurizio's story provides a deserter's view of the war as he tells how he, a "perfect fascist" inspired by Mussolini, was shocked and disillusioned as he saw hungry women and children, the brutal treatment of the Jews, and "Hungarian boys being whipped about the legs. The blood ran down in stripes" (*Stones*, 204). It's not that he was "blind and deaf," he explains, when he saw Jews being forced into the Roman ghetto, he just did not "think about it"; he was "stupid" (*Stones*, 203).

### **Persecution of the Jews and the Brutal Consequences of War**

A central part of the story in *Stones in Water* is Roberto's friendship with Samuele, a Jewish boy from the ghetto in Venice. Roberto had already

been warned by his parents not to associate with Jews—not to “be seen in public with Samuele” (*Stones*, 7–8). Sergio objects to Samuele’s accompanying them to the cinema. They “know about Hitler and the Jews,” he admonishes Roberto and Memo. He warns them not to “play with fire” (*Stones*, 10). Roberto takes steps to protect Samuele’s identity by calling him Enzo—“a good Catholic nick-name” (*Stones*, 31–32) and by giving him his St. Christopher medal to wear round his neck, but he does not fully realize the real danger that Samuele faces as a Jewish boy. From the outset of the novel, Roberto is represented as an innocent teenager whose eyes become opened to the evil that surrounds him. He is slow to make connections because, as an outsider to the Jewish community, he has not been privy to information about the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews. He does not understand, for example, the significance of the barbed wire enclosure he and the other boys are told to construct for the silent, barefoot, starving men, women, and children who soon arrive. After an incident in which Roberto risks punishment for helping Enzo extricate himself from a dangerous situation when the boys are told to strip off and go swimming, he asks Enzo what would really happen to him if his secret were discovered. At first, he disbelieves what Enzo tells him about the death camps and the fact that Jews are killed just because they are Jews.

The importance of embedding the facts of the Holocaust in a greater understanding about prejudice, evil, and hate is pointed out by Edward T. Sullivan.<sup>6</sup> Writing about the “literature of atrocity,” Elizabeth Bauer suggests that the Holocaust and the “depiction of evil” should not be treated as though it is “nameless, faceless, and of obscure origins”; it should be presented in a “wider context for understanding.”<sup>7</sup> Napoli shows how, in war, brutality becomes normalized. Enzo is blackmailed by one of the boys, who demands his food for keeping his identity secret; and when in the Ukraine, in the bitter winter, Enzo is kicked to death by boys for the boots he had retrieved from a frozen dead German soldier, Roberto notes that the boy, who subsequently wears Enzo’s boots, shows no remorse. Sadism is represented through the character of the German, Arbeiter, who, seeing a small girl clinging to the barbed wire of the enclosure, “plucks” the wire so that it hits her and rips “her lips. Blood ran down her neck and over her dress” (*Stones*, 65). Winner also of the 1998 Golden Kite Award for Fiction, and a 1998 ALA Best Book for Young Adults, *Stones in Water* is praised by Sullivan as a “gripping, superbly written Holocaust story told from a little-known perspective” (Sullivan, 59).

Napoli positions the Nazis' persecution of the Jews in a context that shows the disempowerment, suffering, and hate that was experienced by many in the Second World War. Roberto's journey across the Ukraine is also used by Napoli to highlight the suffering of Ukrainian civilians. Desperate for food, Roberto arrives at a deserted village where the bodies of the villagers lie in their homes where they have been shot. There is one survivor—a young boy. Roberto's senses are numbed by "the evil around him" as he steps over the dead bodies of a girl and woman to reach for food (*Stones*, 130). It was Stalin, he is told by Maurizio, who had caused the famine because he had sent the Ukrainian farmers to Siberia. He tells Roberto about the "numb" and "unthinking" burning of nearly everything as German and Italian soldiers made their way to Stalingrad, which was being starved into submission on Hitler's orders (*Stones*, 205). The association between unthinking and cruelty is made when Roberto realizes that despite the seeming benevolence of Wasser, one of the soldiers assigned to oversee the boys in northeast Germany, the man is unbelievably stupid, for he has no sense of the boys' "homesickness or hunger" (*Stones*, 82). Agnew and Fox argue that in *Stones in Water*, "Roberto faces enough realism and brutality to transmute the conventional excitements of an adventure story into something more substantial in its impact" (Agnew, 147).

In *Fire on the Hills*, Napoli includes episodes involving the persecution and deportation of Italian Jews as the Germans sweep through Italy. Roberto arrives in Sicily on an American "enemy" ship that is part of the Allied invasion, jumps ship in the midst of the bombardment of the coast, and makes his way to Messina, where he is captured once more by the Nazis. He is taken to Naples, where the Germans are given orders from Hitler to "reduce the city to mud and ashes" before retreating (*Fire*, 42). There is a complete disregard for human life and suffering, as the Germans destroy homes, factories, and the aqueducts. "They shot anyone who protested—man or woman. Shot them. Dead" (*Fire*, 46). Roberto is commanded to translate orders that Italian men be rounded up for "forced labor" (*Fire*, 46). When only a hundred and fifty men reported, the Germans went from house to house, shooting at the locks. If they disbelieved wives' explanations for the absence of their husbands, the Germans shot the wives. They shot men they found who were armed. "They shot parents while children looked on" (*Fire*, 47). The tone of the anonymous narrator is expressionless and detached. Roberto, who throughout his ordeals has been represented as possessing an inner moral integrity and sensitivity to

the suffering of others, wants “to bite his own tongue off” as, tied by a rope to a German soldier, he is forced to be both participant and observer (*Fire*, 47). In a scene that Napoli says was based on a true incident, Roberto describes a boy forced to walk into a burning building by a Nazi officer who accuses him of throwing grenades at the Germans. In the story, Roberto begs the German officer with him to shoot the boy to save him from unbearable pain. In real life, Napoli observes, the boy was not shot, but she changed things a little for the book.<sup>8</sup> For Roberto, the brutality to which he is exposed in Italy circles back to the horrors he had witnessed earlier. When he sees an Italian soldier—a deserter—shot point-blank in Messina by the German officer who is in charge of Roberto in Naples, Roberto is reminded of the earlier killing of Maurizio by a Nazi officer. It is a memory that does not leave him. Maurizio was killed when they were recaptured off Crete on their way from the Ukraine to Italy. The German soldier had slammed Maurizio’s head with the “gift-stone” that Roberto had received from a Jewish girl in the enclosure he had helped build (*Fire*, 75). Roberto had risked his life to give her food.

### Resistance

*Stones in Water* and *Fire in the Hills* are also centered on issues of power, repression, and rebellion or resistance, issues that inform the narratives of young adult novels, as Trites argues, in *Disturbing the Universe*. The adolescent struggle against institutional power in these novels is transmuted into resistance against the Germans, who exercise power over the kidnapped boys by the restriction of communication, constant surveillance, and the threat of death or severe punishment. Trites, referring to Foucault’s theories on power, writes that “power can be both repressive and enabling; it is from within the confines of powerlessness that people rebel and discover their own power.”<sup>9</sup> Although the authoritarian power exercised by the Germans disempowers Roberto and the other boys, Napoli emphasizes that resistance is also possible, whether by taking small steps toward a sense of personal empowerment or joining forces with a resistance movement. Roberto experiences “a sudden sense of power” when he works out how to outsmart the German soldiers (*Stones*, 67). He subverts their all-seeing control by carrying out subversive acts in the open. “If a person moved as though he knew what he was doing, as though

he were doing only things he had a right to do, he didn't draw attention. It was as though he became invisible" (*Stones*, 66–67).

In *Stones in Water*, the friendship of Samuele and Roberto, subversive in itself, is a source of liberation and a bulwark against fear and intimidation. As in her novel *Hush*, Napoli places emphasis on using the power of language as a tool of resistance. The power to communicate freely is central to sustaining the boys' friendship, as they retain the ability to converse in their Venetian dialect; they had stayed together despite Nazi attempts to control the boys by dividing them into groups according to their dialects. Enzo tells stories to Roberto, weaving into them familiar Venetian landmarks that bring Roberto his "only truly peaceful moments" (*Stones*, 85). In the Ukraine, as Enzo lies dying, he tells Roberto to continue to tell stories to himself in order to keep his spirit strong; that Roberto must fight so that their captors can never take over his inner self. Enzo had also used language as a weapon against the Nazis through his "fighting words" and through his baiting of Wasser—addressing him as "You big lump of pig dung" after Wasser had caught Roberto stealing eggs (*Stones*, 79). Wasser, who does not understand their Venetian accent, only laughs, but the boys do not, although they feel an exhilarating freedom in using insulting language. Trites explains that "antiestablishment humor" provides an "emotional outlet" that helps adolescents "reconcile to living with the establishment" (Trites, 35). The use of language for empowerment is emphasized again as Roberto explains that their school Italian "was prized among the boys: language was necessary for plotting" for the theft of food and escape (*Stones*, 89). Yet, Enzo and Roberto and the other boys, under the threat of instantaneous punishment or death, can only rebel within narrowly proscribed limits; and they can never be reconciled to their imprisonment. The point is made in a review in *Horn Book Magazine* that the "horrors that" Roberto "witnesses and the deprivations that he experiences change Roberto's motivation from self-preservation to guarded activism."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Partigiani**

In *Fire in the Hills*, emphasis is placed on group resistance, whether this is unorganized "orphan rebels" who resist the Nazis in Naples (*Fire*, 53) or the *partigiani*—the resistance workers who work to free Italy from the

Germans and the Fascists. Much of the novel follows the work of the *partigiani*, whom Roberto eventually joins. In particular, Napoli draws attention to women's roles in the war, not only their suffering caused by loss but also their participation in the resistance movement. A young woman, Volpe Rossa, a leader of the *partigiani*, becomes a leading protagonist in the last half of the novel. Roberto, as her aide, is a bystander as Volpe plans and carries out dangerous assignments, until she is finally shot in an ambush. Women are described as providing shelter for the *partigiani*, using wagons and bicycles to carry messages and arms, and working on underground papers. Made clear also, however, is the role that sexual exploitation plays in the relationship between German soldiers and Italian women. German soldiers pick up and abuse young women; some women act as prostitutes; others, working with the resistance, flirt with German soldiers in order to distract their attention.

The reprisals for the *partigiani*, if they are caught, are spelled out in the news of the Nazis' reprisal killing of five thousand *partigiana* in Milan and Turin: "Corpses of *partigiana* were hung from trees and lampposts to intimidate others. And sometimes people who had nothing to do with the resistance at all were shot. Gratuitous killing. It was as though killing had become a habit. Or a disease" (*Fire*, 142). The passage is another example of how Napoli does not spare her readers in showing war as an atrocity. Roberto reports on the chaotic progress of war, as the Allies bomb cities in the north, "trying to kill Nazis"; the Nazis, meanwhile, bomb the northern hills for *partigiana*. "Every semblance of sanity was gone" (*Fire*, 145). Rochman refers to *Fire in the Hills* as "part violent war story" and "part survival story." She believes that this "gripping" novel will "draw World War II history fans with its focus on the brave young partisans who deliver arms and medicines, help prisoners escape, and pass messages about enemy troops and plans."<sup>11</sup> The same attention that Napoli pays to outsiders and "others" in her other novels is seen in the credence she gives not only to partisans but also to women and deserters, including German deserters. In *Fire in the Hills*, Roberto works with a German soldier who, like thousands of others, was sickened by what he had seen at Dachau, deserted, and joined the resistance. Roberto finally turns homeward, back to Venice, just after he has turned sixteen, where he is told "order is being restored." What meaning did the word *order* have, Roberto asks? He had "been without order for so long" (*Fire*, 213).

### The Trauma of War

Napoli depicts war as violent and chaotic. She is passionate about the need to tell children the truth about subjects such as war, slavery, and kidnapping. There is “nothing worse,” she says, “than a book about war for children in which no one you care about dies. It is just the biggest lie in the world. War kills people and kills indiscriminately.” She points out that “war hurts children as well as adults and good people as well as bad people” (Napoli, author interview). In *Fire in the Hills*, a captured resistance worker waiting to be executed writes about his feelings about war in a letter. He now knows, he writes, what the war is about: “This is a war about the most basic things. About freedom. And dignity.” In the letter, there is harsh criticism of the Fascists and the Nazis who were responsible for unimaginable acts. The letter writer affirms that no matter how many are killed, “we are like the spine of a giant animal, a wild thing that can never be tamed, never be caught in a cage. We will carry that beast forever, to victory” (*Fire*, 83). Elsewhere in the novel, there is harsh criticism of Mussolini and his role in the war. The Italian soldiers are described as ill-equipped and demoralized in comparison with the German troops.

Roberto is traumatized by some of the events he witnesses. He is frequently in a state of numbness. He works through his terrible experiences on a day when he is in the fields of a farm prior to his joining the *partigiana*. As he swings a hoe, stopping to clear the mud from the blade, his head “throbbled. Memories were bullets.” The repetitive “swing, swing, wipe” punctuates his narrative (*Fire*, 76). One week was like a “dream,” another a “nightmare” (*Fire*, 77). Nevertheless, Napoli constructs a young person who can also be seen as the embodiment of fortitude and resistance, and who survives, untarnished by what he has witnessed. “There are no narrative byways or flights of fantasy here, just the power of a story in which things can only get worse, and the afterglow that comes from the author’s portrayal of good triumphing in the bleakest circumstances,” observes Geraldine Brennan in a review of *Stones in Water* in *Times Educational Supplement*.<sup>12</sup> There is the suggestion that there is a healing process and recovery after war. Roberto tells Maurizio in *Stones in Water* that Venice would be rebuilt with stones such as his gift-stone. He continues: “If you have enough stones and the water is shallow enough, you can build a city up through the waves. Like Venice” (*Stones*, 208).

The importance of Italy for Napoli, as a writer, is seen again in novels discussed in the following chapter.

## NOTES

1. Donna Jo Napoli, personal copy of "Essay on the Occasion of Receiving the Sydney Taylor Older Children's Literature Award." Reprinted in *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Librarians*, June 20–23, 1999, 277–278. Hereafter referred to as Napoli, Taylor.

2. Quotes are from the paperback edition of *Stones in Water*.

3. Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox, *Children at War: From the First World War to the Gulf* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 145. Hereafter referred to as Agnew.

4. For example, Hazel Rochman, review of *Stones in Water*, *Booklist*, vol. 94 (October 1, 1997), 333.

5. Unsigned review of *Stones in Water*, *Kirkus*, vol. 74, no. 14 (October 15, 1997), 727.

6. Edward T. Sullivan, *The Holocaust in Literature for Youth: A Guide and Resource Book* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 1999), 5. Hereafter referred to as Sullivan.

7. Elizabeth R. Bauer, "A New Algorithm in Evil: Children's Literature in a Post-Holocaust World," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 24, no. 3 (September 2000), 384–385.

8. Donna Jo Napoli, interview by author, March 14, 2008. Hereafter referred to as Napoli.

9. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 79. Hereafter referred to as Trites.

10. Kitty Flynn, review of *Stones in Water*, *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January 1998), 77–78, Academic Search Premier, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu> (accessed 11/12/2009).

11. Hazel Rochman, review of *Fire in the Hills*, *Booklist*, vol. 130, no. 1 (September 1, 2006), 130.

12. Geraldine Brennan, "Dreams Meet Gritty Realism," *Times Educational Supplement*, no. 4314 (March 5, 1999), 27.

## Chapter Nine

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# Journeys: *Alligator Bayou*, *The King of Mulberry Street*, and *North*

IN TWO OF THE NOVELS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER, Napoli writes stories about immigrants—outsiders—who come to the United States from Sicily and Italy. Napoli's most recent novel for young adults, *Alligator Bayou*, is one of her toughest novels dealing with the subject of bigotry and violence against minorities. The novel is based on the lynching of Sicilians in Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899. In Napoli's novel, fourteen-year-old Calogero, who has journeyed from Cefalù to Tallulah, is the only one to escape the vindictiveness of the mob that lynches members of the family with whom he lives. In *The King of Mulberry Street*, written for a younger audience, Napoli writes a more hopeful story about a young immigrant Italian boy whose mother wishes him to escape the poverty in Napoli. He is placed alone as a stowaway aboard a cargo ship to New York, where he must fend for himself as a street-boy. In *North*, a boy makes his escape from his overprotective mother and travels as far as Baffin Island, where he stays with a man who has chosen to live in isolation. Napoli offers her readers an opportunity to read and think about ways of knowing other than their own as young people undertake these fictional journeys that expose them to different cultures, prejudices, and dangers.

### *ALLIGATOR BAYOU*

The impetus for this novel, Napoli explains in her afterword, came from reading a newspaper article about “five Sicilian grocers” in Tallulah “who

served a black customer before a white one because he had entered the store first; they wound up dead—lynched” (*Alligator Bayou*, 275). Her research led to the full story of how Frank, Joseph, and Charles Defatta; Rosario Fiducia; and Giovanni Cirano (or Cirone), all from Cefalù in Sicily, were lynched in Tallulah, Madison Parish, in 1899 as a direct cause of a shooting incident involving a Doctor J. Ford Hodge. Although Hodge was not killed, the fury of the white citizens, deeply prejudiced against Sicilians, was such that they dragged two men to a makeshift gallows at the local slaughterhouse and three more to a tree in the yard of the jail. The Italian government eventually became involved as they investigated the crime and demanded that restitution be made. In 1901, President William McKinley requested “indemnities in his message to Congress,” and a payment was made.<sup>1</sup> It was not an isolated incident. Eleven Sicilians had been lynched in 1891 in New Orleans. In her research notes to the novel, Napoli provides websites for readers to find information about the Tallulah lynching and the socioeconomic context in which it took place, as well as information about other lynchings of Sicilian immigrants in the South. For further research, Napoli drew upon “American slave narratives, narratives by Tunica people recorded by Mary Haas, and diaries and fiction written by people from that part of Louisiana in that period.” She writes that “her attention was as much on language and culture as on history,” and she provides information about her resources for language and speech usage (*Alligator Bayou*, 276).

### **The Community of Tallulah, 1899**

Relying on her extensive research, Napoli provides a detailed picture of the community of Tallulah, which included the dominant white men of power and privilege who ran the town and the town’s physician, Dr. Hodge. There was also a fairly large black population in the surrounding area, many of them the children of slaves. Napoli explains that she “built characters . . . around people who testified or were talked about in the testaments taken after the Tallulah lynching” (*Alligator Bayou*, 275). These included names of those involved in the lynching—for example, a Mr. Will Rogers and a Mr. Coleman—as well as those who spoke up against the lynchers, including the barber, Mr. Blander; a French priest, Father May; Frank Raymond, a young artist from Iowa; and Joe Evans, a member of the

black community. Napoli makes some changes to the names and details of the Sicilians who were lynched. An added character is the narrator of the novel, fourteen-year-old Calogero. On the death of his mother, Calogero is sent to Louisiana from Cefalù and comes to Tallulah to be with a friend of his father's, Francesco, who lives with his brothers, Giuseppe and Carlo, and their cousins, thirteen-year-old Cirone and his older brother, Rosario. They live together as one family and, like the Sicilians who were lynched in Tallulah, are fruit and vegetable growers and grocers. Other characters important to Calogero's story are Joseph, a member of the Tunica tribe, who lives his solitary life by the Mississippi River; friends from the African American community, including Calogero's girlfriend, Patricia; and Miss Clarie, a teacher from New Jersey who teaches children from the black community.

In *Alligator Bayou*, Napoli writes from the immigrant Sicilians' side of the story—the “other” side of the story to that recounted in some newspapers. She provides a vivid account of the terrible injustice and bigotry that was embedded in Louisiana during the 1890s, when “lynchings peaked in the United States” (Haas, 2), and through her story shows how bigotry can influence people's perception of what actually happens. Napoli integrates facts about the Tallulah lynching into Calogero's first-person narrative, in which he describes his life with his Sicilian family. He tells about the building tension between Dr. Hodge and Francesco over Francesco's goats that stray onto Dr. Hodge's property and stamp about on his porch, keeping him awake at night. Francesco, however, believes that he can deal with Dr. Hodge. Meanwhile, tension is also building because Francesco insists on serving African American customers when they are first in line in his store before white members of the community. Francesco's response to Willy Rogers's demand that he wants “Negroes” to stand “out by the back door” until the whites are “served first” is that no one is going to tell the Sicilians how their business should be run (*Alligator Bayou*, 10). Willy Rogers is not their “boss,” he tells Calogero and Carlo, and he plans to accost Willy Rogers with a gun by the railway tracks where Rogers passes by each day (*Alligator Bayou*, 11). Calogero is dispatched by Carlo to ask the young white artist, Frank Raymond, to arrange that Willy Rogers bypass the tracks. Violence is avoided on this occasion, but incidents involving the serving of customers and the trespassing of goats increase and pave the way for the terrible events that occur in 1899.

### Bigotry against Sicilians

Vincenza Scarpaci explains that Sicilians in Louisiana were subject to “forms of white violence, terror, and exclusion.”<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of bigotry against Sicilian and Italian immigrants, in which they are categorized as murderers associated with the Mafia, is heard as Calogero reads in the newspapers that Sicilians are “uncivilized” and “carry stiletto knives” and will “use them on anyone” (*Alligator Bayou*, 164). Will Rogers is of the opinion that Sicilians are “criminals” and “Mafia” (*Alligator Bayou*, 9). Francesco tells Carlo and Calogero that Rogers says there are so many Sicilians in Louisiana that they are “running honest men out of business.” They are, he says, an “epidemic” that “should be wiped out” (*Alligator Bayou*, 9–10). The assumption among many of Tallulah’s white citizens of the community is that “dagoes are worse than trash” (*Alligator Bayou*, 224).

Napoli makes clear, through dialogue between Calogero and the brothers with whom he lives, how much of this bigotry came from fear of the Sicilians’ potential to be economically successful. Scarpaci explains: “Over time, Sicilian immigrants became agricultural and commercial entrepreneurs, an opportunity not equally afforded to African Americans” (Scarpaci, 61). They even at times employed members of the African American community. Napoli provides a rich socioeconomic background to the novel, in which she documents the Sicilians’ success as fruit and vegetable growers and traders in the context of the history of slave labor and the plantations. The Sicilians, at first, worked in the plantations despite the hard labor of cutting sugar cane because, for them, the pay was good. But, Giuseppe explains, the Sicilians found alternative ways of making money, including gardening, fishing, and trading fruit with South Americans. Francesco points out that there were no “good fruits or vegetables” in Louisiana before the Sicilians arrived (*Alligator Bayou*, 43). After the 1890 lynching of eleven men in New Orleans, Italians were said to have taken over the selling of produce. The resentment against the Sicilians’ economic success is heard in *Alligator Bayou* through comments that the Tallulah white community does not need “dirty money from dirty foreigners” (*Alligator Bayou*, 178). Typical of the threatening dialogue between certain prominent members of the town and the Sicilians is the exchange between Francesco and Mr. Wilson, the saloon keeper. Wilson warns Francesco not to sell *limoncello* on July fourth, insisting that what Francesco is selling is whisky, for which he needs a permit. “You sell one

drop of that lemon stuff and I'll get Sheriff Lucas in here so fast, you won't have time to cock a gun" (*Alligator Bayou*, 178).

### **Making Friends with the African American Community**

Another major cause of the bigotry against Sicilians was the fear among the white community that the Sicilians would make friends with the black community. Calogero is told by Giuseppe that whites had feared that the Sicilians would cause unrest on the plantations. Laws were "passed against commingling" with African Americans, and friendship between Sicilians and African Americans was discouraged (*Alligator Bayou*, 162). When Calogero and his African American girlfriend, Patricia, walk to Miliken's Bend, where Calogero plans to visit Francesco's brother-in-law and his ten-year-old son, Salvatore, Patricia insists that she and Calogero dive into hiding on opposite sides of the road when meeting others. Calogero had earlier read the newspaper account of the lynching of "Dago Joe," who was on trial for murder. The only evidence against him was his "low birth" because he had a Sicilian father and a "Negro" mother (*Alligator Bayou*, 164).

Napoli reproduces the rhetoric of bigotry through the speech of the white boys who beat up Calogero and Cirone: "They's talking about how y'all went to a darkie gathering. All you dagoes." Calogero and Cirone are accused of "fraternizing with them cotton pickers" (*Alligator Bayou*, 148). Phrases such as "eating the same food, from the same plates" point to the Jim Crow laws. Elsewhere in the novel, there is another complaint about the Sicilians who serve "'darkies ahead of whites! Ain't you got eyes?'" Mr. Coleman challenges them. "I walk in here and I see three darkies. That makes me first. You got that?" (*Alligator Bayou*, 112).

Calogero's family of Sicilians resist segregation. The tender romance of Calogero and Patricia and the sweet and easy relationship between them is a contrast to the vituperative dialogue of white segregationists. Calogero and Cirone break through barriers by forging friendships with Patricia's brother Charles and his two friends, Ben and Rock. Francesco and the other Sicilians attend the graduation party held to honor African American students who attended the separate school held in the basement of the Baptist church. Calogero hears Francesco's vigorous refusal to allow the Jim Crow laws to interfere with the equal treatment of his customers.

While the Jim Crow laws forbade the serving of food to “whites and Negroes in the same room at the same time,” they had nothing to say about selling food in a grocery (*Alligator Bayou*, 10). Francesco points out that African Americans are the only people who have been decent to them in Tallulah.

In *Alligator Bayou*, the Sicilians in Tallulah occupy a position in society that mirrors that described by Scarpaci, in which they were seen to be “neither black nor white, even as they moved out of the class of wage earners to become entrepreneurs” (Scarpaci, 73). Cirone expresses his frustration at their ambiguous status: “They don’t want us with whites and they don’t want us with Negroes. They think Sicilians belong nowhere, with no one. Like we’re not people at all” (*Alligator Bayou*, 150). Maybe, wonders Calogero, that is why his family live on the outskirts of the town because “Jim Crow laws don’t allow Sicilians to live anywhere inside town, not with the whites, not with the Negroes” (*Alligator Bayou*, 219). Segregation laws affect the Sicilians in areas of education, voting rights, and jobs. Calogero has been tutored by Frank Raymond because he is not allowed to attend the white school in Tallulah. Louisiana voting laws effectively excluded Sicilians as well as African Americans because, added together, their numbers exceeded the whites in the state. Calogero complains that he cannot “chop cotton.” He does not see how he can be blocked from “white things and Negro things at the same time” (*Alligator Bayou*, 198). He is discriminated against when he applies for a job in the kitchens of a steamboat on the Mississippi, where supper is being served after the tournament that is being held in the town (*Alligator Bayou*, 224). Feeling that they belong neither with whites nor blacks, the Sicilians are caught between clinging to their own cultural traditions and adopting new ones.

### **Sicilian or American?**

The character Cirone is used to show how the Sicilians experience conflicts between their own and American traditions. He tells Calogero that he is “sick of being Italian.” He feels that the older Sicilian brothers are “like a wall around” him (*Alligator Bayou*, 188). He decides to speak English when not at home and to eat American food whenever possible. He is “going to act American” and wants to “become an American citizen” (*Alligator Bayou*, 189). Conflict with family members arises over observing national and religious holidays and food. When Cirone tells the other

family members that he and Calogero wish to celebrate Fourth of July with their African American friends, he is told that Sicilians are not Protestants. The fact that it is a national and not a religious celebration does not sway Carlo, Giuseppe, or Francesco. They are not going to the Baptist church; they will have their own picnic where they will eat *frittata*, not ice cream. They will celebrate, instead, the “*fiesta* of Santa Rosalia.” Cirone’s impassioned reply that they care more about “some dumb saint’s *fiesta*” than the big occasion of the Fourth of July is met with the reminder that they never “forget the saints” nor that they are Sicilian (*Alligator Bayou*, 183). Representing a new generation who are able to integrate the old and the new, Cirone and Calogero defy their elders and attend the barbecue at the church. They are going to “be all-American for one afternoon,” Cirone tells Calogero (*Alligator Bayou*, 189).

But Napoli also shows how important it is for the Sicilians to retain ties with their country and religion. Scarpaci writes that “Italians in 1880–1910 rural Louisiana did not view their social world as white and black, but identified themselves as members of Sicilian towns and regions with a nationality, gender, class, and race as distinct as Irish or Polish” (Scarpaci, 68). In *Alligator Bayou*, a sense of family is sustained through the meals that the family eats together; and Napoli, as always, provides sumptuous descriptions of Italian food. Calogero is homesick for the cathedral and the music, food, and landscape of Cefalù. The Catholic faith is important to Calogero and his Sicilian family, both in Cefalù and in Tallulah. There is no Catholic church, but an itinerant French priest, Father May, comes to their home on visits and they celebrate Mass. The Catholic faith is also a target of bigotry. During the searing scene before the actual lynching, one man insists that Giuseppe and Carlo are in need of a priest. He is told that although Catholics are everywhere in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, they “keep clean of them in Tallulah.” It is pointed out to him that Father May “ain’t even American. He’s as bad as these dagoes” (*Alligator Bayou*, 257). Calogero sees Carlo trying to free his hands so that he can cross himself before he is lynched.

## Lynching

Although Napoli provides enough details to capture the horror and viciousness of the lynching of Calogero’s fellow Sicilians, she distances the moment of the lynching as Calogero is forced away from the slaughterhouse

by Patricia and his African American friends just as he sees the noose put around Giuseppe's neck. She does, however, provide a full account of the lynching of eleven Italian prisoners in New Orleans after the shooting of David Hennessy, superintendent of the New Orleans Police, which reveals the extent of the injustice and mob violence that threatened Sicilian immigrants in Louisiana. Calogero is told by Giuseppe of the huge mob who stormed the jail after a trial in which six of those accused were found innocent, and the verdict on three others was not decided because the defendants could not speak enough English. All nine were brutally murdered, plus two other Sicilian inmates. Calogero and Cirone are, thus, made aware of the dangers they face in their community.

The Sicilians in the Tallulah area had a reputation for violence before the events that led to the lynching. The article "Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899" by Edward F. Haas (recommended by Napoli in her resources) includes newspaper accounts of the killing of "an old soldier" by Joseph Defina of Milliken Bay (known as Giuseppe) and the shooting of a "negro boy" for the theft of a watermelon by Frank Defatta (Haas, 2). Napoli certainly depicts her Sicilian protagonists as volatile. Francesco is portrayed as quick tempered, and Giuseppe, particularly, has a tendency to respond angrily to provocative behavior. But they are also represented as extremely hardworking and honest men with a sense of justice. Napoli chooses to take these incidents reported in Haas's article and fictionalize them to show how facts become distorted by those who wish to smear those they hate. In *Alligator Bayou*, Francesco impatiently pushes Pat Matthews, an old white man and former soldier, out of the grocery with a broom when he has opened a box belonging to Francesco. In an earlier incident, Giuseppe had pretended to shoot at children stealing watermelons from his wagon. When Patricia repeats the charge that Italians are murderers, Calogero answers that that belief is the reason why a rumor can spread that his "uncles had shot an old man and some little kid." The facts of the case have nothing to do with it, Patricia tells him. It is the "plantation owners' truth" that matters (*Alligator Bayou*, 193). The "truth" of certain Tallulah white men is heard when the mob gathers after the shooting of Dr. Hodge. Saloon owner John Wilson, afraid of competition from the Sicilians' grocery store, accuses the Sicilians of plotting murder and of bragging how they have already killed "two white clerks at a plantation store." He complains about the money the Sicilians

make, saying that they do not spend it but have so much that they make everyone else look "like paupers" (*Alligator Bayou*, 251).

The account of the shooting of the goats and the subsequent confrontation between Francesco and Dr. Hodge in *Alligator Bayou* follows the sequence of events as reported in the article by Haas—even to the reported dialogue. "You shoot my goat," Francesco accuses Dr. Hodge when he visits Dr. Hodge the morning after the killing. "Now you better shoot me" (*Alligator Bayou*, 244). Napoli also follows the account of the incident, which ended with the shooting, but importantly, not the killing, of Dr. Hodge by Giuseppe. The Sicilians were accused of closing the grocery for the day because they were plotting to kill the doctor. Calogero, narrating the story from the Sicilians' perspective, tells of the grief caused by the killing of Francesco's favorite goat, for which, he, Calogero, was partly to blame because he had failed to tie the animals up for the night. The store was closed because they were mourning the loss of the goats, he tells customers.

Elements of the Tallulah community were blinded to any sense of justice by fear of those who were both foreign to them and economically independent. Haas reports that in the aftermath of the case, Frank Raymond told interviewers that "there was a plot, not among the Italians to harm the doctor, but among the shopkeepers of the village and others, from a spirit of rivalry in trade, and from a desire to prevent the Italians from voting" (Haas, 8). Scarpaci explains that "Italian immigrants and African Americans often supported each other in times of trouble and loss" (Scarpaci, 67). This is demonstrated in Napoli's novel when Calogero is able to escape with the help of Patricia and his African American friends. Joseph, a lone member of the Tunica tribe, who has his own story of how hate and discrimination had driven him from his home, also comes to Calogero's aid by giving him a skiff so that he can travel down the Mississippi to Baton Rouge, from where he can walk to the Sicilian community in Tangipahoa Parish.

In a review in *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Elizabeth Bush writes that "attitudes and motivations" of Napoli's protagonists "rise well above stereotype" and that the "wealth of detail at the bayou's edge . . . makes the inexorably approaching violence all the more shocking in its contrast to sleepy everyday life."<sup>3</sup> Napoli, writes another reviewer, encourages readers "to reconsider the motivations behind this calamity and other manifestations of racism."<sup>4</sup> Gillian Engberg comments that Napoli "sheds

cold, new light on Southern history and on the nature of racial prejudice.”<sup>5</sup> *Alligator Bayou* was selected as one of ALA’s Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults in 2010.

### ***THE KING OF MULBERRY STREET***

In her other novel about immigrants and prejudice, Napoli draws on a family story about her paternal grandfather, Domenico, who came to America as a stowaway when he was only five years old. Napoli’s father told her that he was only a child when he started a business as a sandwich maker in New York. Her story, however, writes Napoli, is based more on her research and her knowledge of the cities of Napoli and New York than on her family’s anecdotes. Napoli constructs a compelling story about nine-year-old Beniamino, who lived in Napoli with members of his Jewish family before he was put on a ship as a stowaway bound for America by his mother. The man to whom his mother had paid his passage had disappeared, and while older readers may guess the truth, Beniamino, young and innocent, neither realizes the price his mother pays to get him onboard the cargo ship nor understands that she intended him to travel alone. All he has are the clothes he stands up in, his first pair of shoes given to him by his mother that morning, and the “holy tassels”—“*tzitzit*” from his grandfather’s prayer shawl that his mother has hidden in one of his shoes (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 41).

The behavior of Beniamino’s mother, a literate Jewess who is unable to obtain a job with an illegitimate child, might certainly raise questions for a reader regarding a mother’s responsibility in protecting her child. But taking responsibility for self is a value that is emphasized in this novel. Beniamino’s mother leaves him with the words that it is his “job to survive.” He must “watch and learn and do whatever” he has “to do to fit in” (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 23). In following his story, readers experience a young boy’s determination to hold on to life, as he nearly drowns when he is flung off the cargo ship into New York harbor. He negotiates the confusion of Ellis Island as he goes, unaccompanied, through the immigration process, where he is at risk of being swept up into the illegal *padroni* system or being placed in an orphanage. He argues with the immigration officials over a new name until it is finally agreed that he will be known as Dom Napoli. Dom’s first-person narrative and the use of present

tense are effective strategies for telling the story of a young boy left to fend for himself on the streets of New York without food or shelter and unable to speak the language. In a review in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Napoli is said to capture “the overwhelming feeling of loss and confusion as Dom tries to navigate his way in a world that doesn’t speak his language and that functions on its own set of rules.”<sup>6</sup>

### Street Culture

As in *Alligator Bayou*, Napoli provides a rich socioeconomic context, beginning with Beniamino’s detailed descriptions of the richer and poorer areas of Napoli, as he wanders from the wide streets of Vomero, to the side streets in Napoli where poverty and crime co-exist, to the bay where naked “scugnizzi—urchins” jump from fishing boats (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 16). Once in New York, Dom describes the alley, full of “garbage,” including the “carcass of a big dog,” where he spends his first night in a barrel (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 83–84). Readers learn with Dom about the system whereby young unaccompanied boys, like himself, ostensibly earning their passage to New York, are treated like slave labor under “padroni” who mistreat and beat them. The brutality meted out to the boys is made visible through Dom’s own severe beating at the hands of the “padrone” who has murdered his friend, Tin Pan Alley. Working “for more than three years, six days a week” for his *padrone*, Tin Pan Alley had “paid for [his] passage four or five times over,” as had the other boys he lived with (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 215–216).

The longer Dom spends on the street, the more aware he becomes of other organizations, such as mutual aid societies and the different churches. The farther he explores from Mulberry Street and the Five Points neighborhood, the more he is exposed to ethnicities other than Italians and begins to learn about the prejudices and hierarchies that control how things are run, from religious services in churches to the labor market. The Italians attend services in the basement of Irish churches in Five Points because the Irish were first in the neighborhood; Italians are paid lower wages than other workers. But, as the fruit and vegetable vendor who gives Dom small jobs tells him, “an Irish boss who pays on time is better than an Italian boss” in Italy who does not (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 132).

Dom also encounters prejudice. As Beniamino, he was brought up to be proud of his Jewish heritage but often is reminded of the “adversity”

that his uncle in Napoli had always spoken about (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 70). He is told by his mother never to undress in front of others; and he is warned by a translator at Ellis Island that he does not “want to be taken for a Jew” (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 70). The prejudice that accompanies fear of those that are “different,” an important theme in Napoli’s work, is heard through Dom’s friend, street-boy Gaetano, who, although older, has not, unlike Dom, explored the area of New York City outside Five Points because of his fears. Gaetano has strong opinions and has developed for himself a hierarchy of those Italians who can be trusted depending on their place of origin. He also voices his anti-Semitism as he equates “Yids” with being dirty. “If you go outside Five Points, who knows what they’ll feed you. You’ll get sick as a dog” (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 112). It is Dom who teaches Gaetano another way to think and live.

### **Entrepreneur**

Embedded in the novel’s text are core values that are shown to help Dom survive and that prepare him to look forward to the future with hope and with a purpose. From the beginning of the novel, a willingness to work hard is shown to be key to his survival. He offers to undertake different tasks on the cargo ship, which keeps him on good terms with the crew, although his ultimate goal of securing a passage back to Napoli fails. He hears Gaetano tell him that Italian boys like him have to beg or steal to get money, but he perseveres in looking for work and earns an orange in exchange for stacking fruit for an Italian vendor who proves to be a good friend. He will neither steal nor beg, he tells Gaetano. Rather, Dom becomes an entrepreneur. Smart and resourceful, Dom figures out that he and Gaetano can make a profit by buying long sandwiches at an Italian store, which they can divide into smaller portions to sell on Wall Street where people will pay more for a breakfast or lunch sandwich. By the end of the novel, Dom and Gaetano have expanded their business and taken on other boys as employees. Napoli shows how they calculate the money needed, suffer losses and setbacks, but persevere and work through ideas that improve their business. Dom is given other qualities: loyalty, honesty, and a commitment to friendship and cooperation—values that contribute to his success. Gaetano calls Dom “the king of Mulberry Street” because Dom shares what he has—“just giving things out right and left” (*The King*

of *Mulberry Street*, 97). The goals that he sets himself at the end of the novel are values that are found in Napoli's other novels: He will get the education that his mother had wanted him to have by beginning with "night classes at the settlement house," and he will stand for justice by fighting the *padroni* (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 242).

Napoli does not sugarcoat Dom's adjustment to life as an immigrant. The time when he was nearly beaten to death and then discovers the bloody knife that was used to kill Tin Pan Alley was a "night" in which he "grew up for sure" (*King of Mulberry Street*, 230). Part of him wants to scream because he knows he will not go back to Napoli. He no longer belongs there. Napoli's novel follows a narrative pattern whereby a young boy leaves home and family and matures without the presence of parents. There are, however, adults in *loco parentis* who offer some protection: the fruit and vegetable vendor who supports his business venture; the woman from whom he, Gaetano, and Tin Pan Alley eventually rent a room; and the Polish butcher who takes Dom to his synagogue. By the end of the novel, ten-year-old Dom is mature enough to accept that his mother had "sacrificed" to put him on the boat, "maybe in ways that were awful" (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 241). The one protection his mother had provided for him, Dom now realizes, were his new shoes, which had given people the impression that he was a boy who belonged to a family rather than a homeless street urchin. "She'd tried to protect" him, he acknowledges, "even though she was crazy" to put him on the boat (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 241). As one reviewer writes, Napoli "offers a deftly layered depiction of a boy forced to grow up by circumstances beyond his control."<sup>7</sup> *The King of Mulberry Street* was awarded a Sydney Taylor Honor Book Award, 2006. It is a 2006 National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Book and a 2006 ALA Notable Book.

### NORTH

In *North*, Napoli writes a coming-of-age novel for younger teens that follows the "home-away-home" narrative plot identified by Perry Nodelman, in which home is represented as the safe and secure home of childhood and "away" stands for "danger/and or freedom."<sup>8</sup> Napoli wrote *North* because she lived in Mount Pleasant, Washington, D.C., and "had a friend

who was very, very protective of her son,” and she “always wondered whether he’d rebel when he got a little older.” She also wrote it because she wanted to honor Mathew Henson, who “is a great unsung hero of America.” Coincidentally, a friend of hers has “Mathew Henson’s snowshoes hanging on her wall.<sup>9</sup> In *North*, twelve-year-old Alvin runs away from his home in Mount Pleasant because his mother has locked him into her own ideas for keeping him safe. He is forbidden to have a bike or to go on a biking trip with his uncle. She is afraid to let him go on school excursions or even attend a friend’s sleepover. The day she pays someone to accompany him to school because she does not trust him to keep his distance from drug dealers, Alvin decides that he must get away. He wishes to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Mathew Henson, and go to the North Pole. He journeys by train from Washington, D.C., to New York and from there to Toronto, to Winnipeg, to Churchill. From Churchill, he persuades a trapper to take him on his small plane to Pangnirtung, Baffin Island. He travels farther north by dog sledge to Pond Inlet, from where he walks to Bylot Island, where he spends the summer with a hermit, Idlout Tana. A small map enables readers to follow Alvin’s journey.

### **Safe at Home versus a Dangerous Journey**

The despondency and frustration experienced by Alvin (reminiscent of Zel’s despair in her mother’s tower) are heard as he complains that he is “dying under Mama’s protection. Sometimes he felt already dead” (*North*, 59). Although Alvin recognizes that there might be underlying reasons for his mother’s behavior, such as his father’s death, this does not make it any easier for him. His longing to get away is such that he feels he will “simply burst and die” if he cannot (*North*, 127). There are several times during Alvin’s risky journey to the Arctic when tension is expressed between the safety of home and the danger he encounters on his journey. After nearly freezing to death in a freight van on his way from Winnipeg to Churchill, for example, he thinks that he could return home where he “could stay safe forever. Safe and small in a small world.” His mother would tell him, “Better safe than sorry.” She would also present him with a “list of rules for him to follow so that he’d never run a risk like this again.” He hears his mother’s voice whispering in his ear, “Come home, Alvin,” and “Come get warm. And safe” (*North*, 160). But his determination to follow in the steps of Mathew Henson always carries him forward on his journey, for

he needs to “find out how much he could do, how far he could go” (*North*, 251).

He resists the authority of adults who would send him home, including Manitok, who takes care of him when he arrives at Churchill. He runs from the home of the overbearing white missionary who meets the “runaway” at Pangnirtung (*North*, 201). Donald asks whether Alvin realizes how “extremely lucky” he was to go so “far without something dreadful happening” to him. “The world is full of dangers,” he tells Alvin. “Dangerous things. Dangerous people” (*North*, 209). The “best place for” Alvin is “at home” (*North*, 210). Alvin had, however, listened to the trapper, whom he names “Fox,” who tells him that he killed his first polar bear when he was twelve, and after that, although he was “still not a man. . . . things were different” (*North*, 186). The Inuit to whom he runs after leaving the missionary’s home are willing to help Alvin on his journey. They listen to him and let him work out just how far he wishes to go, rather than imposing the authority of adults over a child. Pauloosie, whom Alvin meets later, is privileged to help him, he tells Alvin.

Alvin is tested by his capacity to deal with the severity of the Arctic conditions as he journeys farther north. The effects of freezing cold are vividly described as he travels without proper clothing in the freight car for over thirty-three hours. His sandwich is like a “dog biscuit,” and “the pain in his hands is excruciating.” He is overcome by fear and screams. “When he stopped, he tasted blood. His mouth was so cold that the corners had ripped when he opened it wide to scream” (*North*, 147). He continues to face challenges that test his mettle throughout his travels, including a nine-hundred-kilometer sledge ride during which the “wind blew almost constantly, screaming across the ice, going directly from north to south” (*North*, 235). When he arrives at Pond’s Inlet, Pauloosie tells Alvin that he must walk the final stretch of his journey alone to Idlouk’s home. Alvin spends months with Idlouk, his mentor, who teaches Alvin how to live in harmony with the Arctic environment. Alvin does not mail the letters he writes to his mother and great grandmother for fear that his mother will track him down and get him sent home before he is ready. His final test is the rescue of Idlouk from a crevasse. Alvin has grown in body and spirit. He is “free,” Idlouk tells him (*North*, 344). Alvin has successfully faced danger and learned values other than those inculcated by his mother and great grandmother. In keeping with a home-away-home narrative plot, Alvin is ready to return home.

### Respecting the Inuit and Their Culture

As in *Alligator Bayou* and *The King of Mulberry Street*, Napoli addresses racial prejudice. Alvin is told by Manitok, “Watch your language,” when he uses the word *Eskimo* because it is regarded as a racial slur by the Inuit (*North*, 162). Napoli exposes the prejudice and imperialism of the Christian church in christening Inuit babies with English names. Manitok, for example, was given the name Martin by the church, but he was named Manitok by his “Inuk *Hanayug*,” who chooses names for babies that suit their characters (*North*, 157). Alvin, who plays a penny whistle, is given the name Kukukulik—“the one who plays the flute”—and his Inuit name is one of several examples of Inuktitut in the text (*North*, 225). Alvin hears the condescension in the missionary’s voice as he tells Alvin that the Inuit have no sense of time. He hears the same condescension turned against him, an African American boy, as the missionary speaks as though Alvin does not “know anything, trying to make him turn himself over to the great white man who knew everything” (*North*, 209).

Information is integrated into Alvin’s story about contemporary and traditional Inuit culture in the north of Canada, as Alvin stays and travels with the Inuit. Alvin learns, for example, of the program to help those who have committed criminal acts, which involves tutoring them in the traditional skills and knowledge of the Inuit as an alternative to prison. He begins to appreciate Inuit values and their skills in a land where “death is always waiting for you to make a mistake” (*North*, 298). As he helps Idlouk trap animals, he internalizes Idlouk’s attitude toward the animals they kill. He tells his mother and grandmother in one of his letters that he chews raw meat carefully, “because there’s no way to not think about the animal that died when you eat it raw. I have to pray extra” (*North*, 299). He writes that he has developed a habit of contemplation that he equates with praying. “Sometimes I look at a thing—any old thing—a coil of rope, a fishing spear, a duck feather—anything—for a long long time. That’s what I mean by praying” (*North*, 298).

### “The Beauty of the Journey”

When Alvin was asked by fourteen-year-old Hardette, his traveling companion on the train from Toronto to Winnipeg, why he wanted to go to Churchill, Alvin had replied that he did not know, only that he had to go.

"Sometimes," she replied, "it's just the beauty of the journey" (*North*, 132). "The Lure of the Arctic Is Pulling at My Heart" is part of the inscription written on the memorial of Mathew Henson in Arlington National Cemetery (*North*, 29). Napoli integrates information about Henson into her story as Alvin follows his hero and his own heart to the Arctic. But more than this, by conveying the absolute, sweeping beauty of the Arctic from winter darkness to summer light, she shows the lure of the Arctic itself. Alvin sees the sky that seems to envelop him. "Everything was dark black and silver, except for the moon—that claw-sharp orange moon" (*North*, 213). At the beginning of summer, the "sky was the cleanest, clearest blue [Alvin] could imagine. The sea was a minty green with chunks of ice floes" (*North*, 331). As in so many of Napoli's novels, attention is drawn to the animals and especially to the birds that inhabit her settings, as Idloulou collects the breast feathers of seabirds for down. Alvin is overwhelmed by the sublimity of the aurora borealis. "He thought about Grandma in church, belting out those hymns of praise for glory" (*North*, 263). Deborah Stevenson refers to the novel as "a fantasy in real terms, a spiritual journey made geographical, and readers prepared to travel thoughtfully and find the point in the journey may find this a horizon-broadening experience."<sup>10</sup>

### Back Home

Napoli leaves Alvin back at the Washington zoo, where he had stood wishing he could travel prior to his running away. He had mailed his packet of letters to his mother and grandmother so that the letters would arrive before him. Alvin is looking forward to earning money and taking his mother and grandmother to New York, but Napoli leaves it to her readers' imagination what his reception at home will be, and how life will be at home for him after his "away" experiences. Does home, perhaps, represent a welcome, safe place for Alvin after the risks and dangers of his journey? Yet, as Napoli shows, home is not always safe. Alvin has been asked to be a drug runner in Mount Pleasant, and Idloulou, at home in the Arctic, is always at risk in a dangerous terrain. Will Alvin, on his return, accept the "constrictions" of home "in order to gain its benefits?" as Nodelman puts it (Nodelman, 81).

Alvin has not been entirely without the protection of adults during his journey. He is given food and shelter by Manitok at Churchill railroad station and stays and travels with Inuit people. What Napoli does show is

Alvin's resistance to adult power and authority that limit his freedom to expand his horizons and deny him the right to think and take responsibility for himself. Alvin's journey ultimately depends on interdependence and relationships rather than on a lone adolescent seeking independence. Napoli emphasizes in this novel, as she does in others, the importance of family and relationships. Alvin is constantly thinking of his mother and great grandmother and the love he has for them, which he expresses in letters to them. When he decides, after sending them one letter, not to mail the others until he begins his journey home, he tries to communicate with them "through his thoughts so they wouldn't worry" (*North*, 276). One of the strongest elements of the novel is the quiet strength of the companionship that develops between Alvin and Idlouk, especially as they tell each other stories at night and play music together—Alvin on his penny whistle and Idlouk on his violin.

### JOURNEYS

In *Alligator Bayou*, Miss Clarrie, the teacher at the African American school, encourages her graduates to travel. "Anywhere you go, it's good for you," she tells Calogero. "You see new ways and learn to appreciate them. Books carry you far, too. But actually experiencing somewhere, ah, that's quite different. The world would be a better place if everyone traveled" (*Alligator Bayou*, 213). Miss Clarrie "says exactly what she feels," Napoli explains. Her own family was poor and did not travel. Because she was on a scholarship, she did not get to go skiing in Switzerland with other college girls. But, she "didn't need to go." She "had grown up on an alm in Switzerland"—she "was Heidi." She "was every character in every book" she had "ever read." Napoli writes that reading gave her the world, so she tries to give her readers the world through her books. She wishes "that all of them could really travel, not just in their heads" (Napoli). It is a message that is reiterated by Calogero's tutor, Frank Raymond, in *Alligator Bayou*: "Don't let them put blinders on you: travel" (*Alligator Bayou*, 231).

In all her young adult novels, Napoli invites her readers to travel to experience other times, cultures, and societies and to experience different values and belief systems. Through her protagonists, she asks young people to think through the implications of some of these values and to understand how prejudice works. As a linguist, she is attentive to language

and dialects, an attention that is evident in all three books discussed in this chapter. Always, she presents other perspectives, especially the perspectives of those who have been objectified and thought of as “other.”

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5. Gillian Engberg, review of *Alligator Bayou*, *Booklist*, vol. 105, no. 12 (February 15, 2009), 69, 71.

6. Megan Hoover, review of *The King of Mulberry Street*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 50, no. 1 (September 2006), 80–81.

7. Hope Morrison, review of *The King of Mulberry Street*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 59, no. 6 (February 2006), 277–278.

8. Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 59. Hereafter referred to as Nodelman.

9. Donna Jo Napoli, e-mail message to author, November 7, 2009. Hereafter referred to as Napoli.

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